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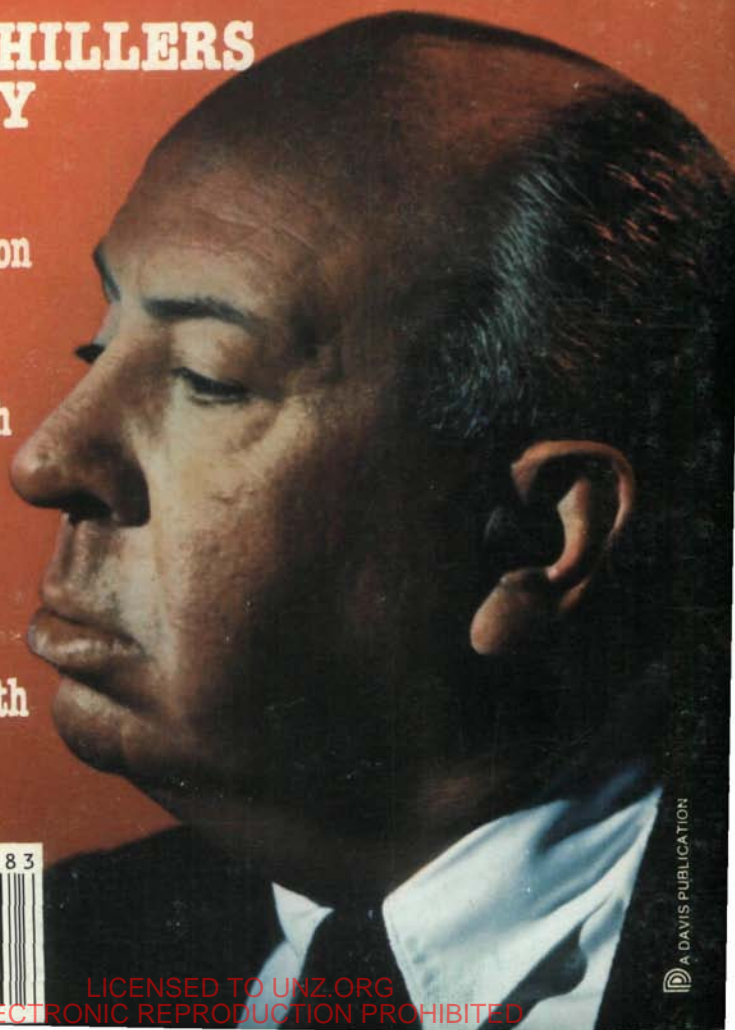
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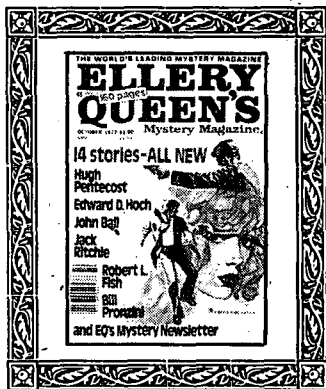
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Introduction

Here is the third volume in this series of Alfred Hitchcock's anthologies. It is entitled *Tales To Make Your Blood Run Cold* and it consists of stories culled from twenty years of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*.

Included are thirty-five tantalizing stories, each one chock full of suspense and surprise. You'll find crime, organized and disorganized; executions, legal and otherwise; manhunts, con games, love-hate triangles, psychopaths, suspicious hitchhikers, smugglers, and storms.

Age has not tarnished these delightful offerings—they are still as fresh and sparkling as when originally published. So lean back, turn the lights down low, and snuggle down under the covers. It is a collection, remember, that is calculated to make your blood run cold.

Alfred Hitchcock



Search the Crying Woman

by Harold R. Daniels

Ed Masters, Sheriff of Clay County, Georgia, hung up his telephone and turned toward Deputy Tom Dunn. His tanned and pleasant face was grave. "You better call the State Police and ask for the dogs," he said. "Kid got into Crying Woman Swamp, hour or so ago."

Dunn moved around the desk to reach the telephone, as Masters stood up and strode across the room to a closet. "Local kid?" Dunn asked.

Masters backed out of the closet, carrying a pair of dusty hip boots. "No," he said. "Twelve-year-old youngster from Birmingham. That was his father on the phone. He left the boy at Luther's fish camp, while he went in the swamp in an air boat after black bass. Last anyone saw of the boy was more than an hour ago." Masters moved to a wall cabinet and picked a light pistol from a half dozen that were hung in the case. Tom Dunn talked briefly on the telephone and then hung up. Masters waited and then said, "I'm going right out there now. You keep store." He issued a few brief instructions and left.

Five miles out of Clay City, the County Seat of Masters' jurisdiction, the blacktopped road he was following on the way to Crying Woman Swamp narrowed and gave way to rutted red clay with deep ditches on either side. The scrub pine woods became infected here and there with lighter patches of palmetto, with an occasional rash of saw grass. And toward the east, the sky seemed to be a more diluted blue.

While still several miles from the borders of the swamp proper, Masters could detect the sweet, rich smell of decaying vegetation and alluvial mud. Crying Woman Swamp was nearly a thousand square miles of impenetrable morass, dotted with unreachable bits of high ground that speckled its lush green surface like currants in a pudding. Masters,

thinking of the search he would shortly be organizing, frowned. Crying Woman Swamp was a perennial menace, sucking humans into its maw too often. Three times during his own tenure of office, he reflected, he had gone into the swamp after missing persons and three times he had failed to find them. Only a year or so ago, a Navy attack plane had crashed into the swamp and vanished without trace, even though helicopters had droned over the green jungle for days thereafter.

The air temperature dropped as Masters turned off the rutted road onto one that was even worse. The coolness was not welcome; the air seemed to become thicker and more oppressive. He parked the county car in the center of a cluster of weathered board shanties and, as he got out, he saw a group of four men hurrying toward him. The man in the lead was rangy and heavily tanned. He wore faded jeans and a soiled T-shirt. To him Masters said, "Any trace of him yet, Bass?" He was scarcely hopeful, and yet he was disappointed when Bass Luther shook his head. "Not a sign," Luther said, confirming the headshake. "I beat my way a mile in the direction his tracks started off. Lost all trace. Nothing but black mud that won't hold a track no time."

The three remaining men had come up by this time. One man wore high boots and breeches, his clothing giving him away as surely as his frantic expression. His words came all in a rush. "You the Sheriff?" When Masters nodded he hurried on. "I'm Peters. Sam Peters from Birmingham. Came down this morning for some bass fishing. Told that boy the air boat wasn't safe. Scared he'd get into the propeller, so I told him to stay at the camp and try for some bluegills 'til I got back. Damn it, I told him to be sure and not wander into the swamp. This'll teach him to mind what his old man says."

Masters, recognizing that the man was beside himself with fear for his son and was attempting to reassure himself with bluster, felt quick pity.

Peters, his face stricken, dropped all pretense. "We'll get him out, won't we, Sheriff?" he pleaded. "I wanted to go after him, but Bass says I'd only get lost myself and make things worse."

Masters said softly, "We'll surely try, Mr. Peters." He turned to face the third man of the group, a white-haired old man who did chores and cooked for Bass Luther's clients.

"You the last one to see him, Dad?"

Dad Roebuck nodded nervously. "Guess I was, Sheriff. He was

down at the boat dock fishin' with a cane pole last I saw. Right about three o'clock. I never did see him wander away. Next I know of, his pa came back with Bass in the boat and started hollerin' after him." He added defensively, "He was a half-growed boy. Bass never told me to keep an eye on him or I would have."

The fourth member of the group of men who had come to meet Masters was a man in his fifties, with leathery skin and eyes narrowed from squinting against sunlight reflecting from the swamp water. His name was Wade—his first name lost in time—and he had been called Cooter by Masters for his thirty-five years and by Masters' father for another ten. He was wiry and spry and gave an impression of wary alertness. He had made his living in the swamp for nearly half a century and in a number of ways. Catching an occasional 'gator. Muskrattin' in season. Guiding an occasional fishing party for Bass Luther. Selling—in the old days—egret feathers. A great many of the local people thought he was crazy. Who but a crazy man would live out his days in the miasma of Crying Woman? Ed Masters disliked the man for vague reasons. A few times members of fishing parties that Cooter had guided had complained of missing wallets, of expensive reels mysteriously lost, of pack gear rifled. But Masters had to admit that Cooter knew the swamp as well as any living man, with one possible exception.

Cooter said ingratiatingly, "Hello, Ed. I was just putting in to see if Bass would borrow me a couple gallons of gas when I heard 'em hollerin' for the little boy." He shook his head. "If he's more than half a mile in there, it's going to be pure hell trying to find him." Cooter turned to speak to Sam Peters. "You think he'll have sense enough to just set still when he finds out he's lost?" he asked.

Peters, obviously holding in his frenzy, said, "I don't know. I don't know." He appealed to Masters. "I know you know your business, Sheriff, but shouldn't we be doing something now? He's lost and scared in there, waiting for his dad to come and get him."

"We've got bloodhounds coming," Masters said. "They should be here in half an hour or so." To give Peters something to do he said, "Suppose you go back to your car and find a jacket or something belonging to the boy. Something we can give the dogs the scent from."

Peters scurried away. And Masters who had already spotted the boy's cane fishing pole lying on the dock—which would have been

adequate for the dogs—gazed after him briefly.

Cooter said scornfully, "Dogs. Five minutes in that sawgrass and their noses will be cut so they couldn't track a skunk. You tried 'em the last couple of times, didn't you?"

He had tried the dogs, Masters remembered, and they had cut up badly, but it wasn't the cutting that had stopped them. They had tried hard, their handler had said on both occasions, but the scent had just vanished. Something in the swamp muck, maybe, that obliterated it. Still and all, it was worthwhile trying with the dogs before he put in the men for an all-out search. Such a search was a pretty big thing to contemplate—big enough to make a man hesitate before launching it.

"I tried them," Masters agreed. "Maybe we'll have better luck this time. The boy's been gone only a short time. Bass, did you make enough racket hollering so he would have heard you if he'd been nearby?"

Bass Luther nodded. "Sure did, Ed. We all hollered together as loud as we could, and then we kept waiting to see if he'd answer. Didn't hear a sound. Voices don't carry a hundred yards once you get into the swamp."

"I know." Masters glanced at his watch. "Bernie Woods ought to be here with the dogs any minute. We'll give them a chance, and if they can't track him, we'll get a real search party together. Cooter, you better figure on helping."

Cooter said eagerly, "Sure, Sheriff. You going to put me on the county for it?"

Masters didn't bother keeping the disgust from his voice. "Sure, Cooter. Dollar and a half an hour. You might as well start earning it right now. You see Joe Turtle, last couple of days?"

"Saw him yesterday," Cooter told him. "Long about midday. Over near the sinkholes." His dislike of the man Masters had called Joe Turtle was obvious in his expression. "Had him a big snapping turtle in his kicker."

Masters glanced again at his watch. "He probably took it to his shanty. Might be there now. How long would it take you to get over there and get back here, Cooter?"

"Hour or so, maybe."

"Get along then. Tell him I want him to help us track down a lost boy. Tell him I said he was to come and help whether he wants to or

not."

Cooter strode to the water's edge and bent to shove his drawn-up boat afloat. Even as he leaped into the boat, a station wagon pulled in at the camp in a red cloud of clay dust and two State Troopers got out.

Masters said, "Hello Bernie, Jake." And as Sam Peters came running up he said, "This is the boy's father."

Sam Peters held out a baseball cap. "This is his," he said, and paused. "You think they'll find him?"

Bernie Woods had opened the back of the station wagon, and two tan hounds, their glossy coats an indication of their magnificent conditioning, leaped to the ground. Bernie immediately put them on short, heavy leashes. "They'll do their best, Mr. Peters," he said. "Doc, here, has found a couple dozen kids in his day." He rubbed the larger dog's head roughly. "You hold onto the cap for the time being, Mr. Peters." He turned to face Sheriff Masters. "You want to lead the way, Ed?"

Masters said, "You lead, Bass. Right on out to where you couldn't find his tracks any more."

They lined out in procession. Bass Luther was in front, with Bernie Woods—close behind—holding back the straining dogs. Sam Peters was next in line. Oddly, although he was dressed in the traditional woodsman's style, he looked less an outdoorsman than Luther in his jeans and T-shirt or Ed Masters in his khaki. Jake, the trooper, and Ed Masters brought up the rear. Dad Roebuck had been left at the fish camp.

The ground beneath their feet became increasingly yielding, as if it were afloat, and the undergrowth around them became more evilly luxuriant. A half mile of it and Luther paused. His words sounded out of place in the oppressive silence. "About here," he said. "I thought I could make out tracks from time to time this far."

Masters glanced down at his own tracks. As fast as his feet left the ground, step after step, black water oozed into the depressions. Bits of earth and moss at the edges crumpled inward, levelling the concavities so that even as they were made the tracks obliterated themselves. It were as if the swamp resented any mark of man's passage. And, of course, a small boy's tracks would vanish even faster than a man's. "Let's try calling to him," he said, and realized with some shame that he did not yet know the boy's name.

"Howard!" Sam Peters called. And then they began to call in unison,

tentatively at first and then more strongly, so that their voices echoed over an adjacent patch of open water. After a moment, Ed Masters held up his hand for silence. Not even an echo of their calling came back to them. It were as if the swamp had disdainfully swallowed their shouted words. Masters said quietly, "All right, Bernie. Try the dogs."

The dogs knew their work. It stood out in their eagerness, their straining haunches as Bernie held the boy's baseball cap out to them. Doc, the larger of the two dogs, moved first, fairly tearing at the leash as he wheeled, nose to the ground, and began to work farther into the swamp in the direction in which they had been proceeding. Bernie Woods said, "He came this far. Now if they can stay on it . . ." He gave the dogs a little more leash.

Masters thought about Woods' statement. The Peters kid had come this far; he sure enough had. But for what? Even to the mind of a little boy, there was no attraction in this desolate, stinking muckland.

After a hundred yards they stopped and called again, more hopefully now that they knew they were going in the direction the boy had taken. The swamp still brooded over their voices and swallowed them once again. There was more open water in sight by this time, and each patch was bordered by saw grass, metallic, light green spears with razor edges that could lay open a man's legs or a dog's muzzle. The smaller of the two hounds began to hang back, following Doc rather than tracking independently, and now Doc came to the edge of an open channel and began to cast about fretfully while the men watched him. After a few minutes, he came toward Bernie Woods and crouched with an almost human expression of frustration on his mournful face.

Bernie Woods compressed his lips and said glumly, "Lost him."

Luther said, "He must have swam across that reach of open water."

Bernie shook his head. "I doubt it. Doc could pick up the scent from the surface water if he had. Looks as if he got into a boat or something."

Sam Peters cried out in happy relief. "Somebody picked him up, you mean? Well, I'm sure glad of that. I don't mind admitting I was scared. Don't know how I would have told his mother if anything happened to Howie. Just the same, I'll tan his behind when I get hold of him."

Masters, hating the need for saying it, said slowly, "We don't know that somebody picked him up, Mr. Peters. Bernie, do you see any signs of a boat landing here?"

Bernie scanned the edge of the murky water. "I don't see anything," he said. "No footprints either. Water's so foul I can't tell if it's been stirred up or not."

In bewildered anguish Peters demanded, "What do you mean? You just said somebody must have picked him up in a boat. What else could have happened?"

Bernie shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry as all getout, Mr. Peters," he said. "I didn't mean just that. I said the dogs lost the scent, just as if he stepped into a boat. Maybe he did. I hope so. Then again, maybe the dogs just plain can't track in this saw grass. What do we do now, Ed?"

Masters said glumly, "Start a search party. Bernie, you take the dogs on back to the fish camp and leave them there. If Cooter has come back, send him to me here. Maybe he can make out if a boat was here or not." He added out of kindness, "You'd better go on back too, Mr. Peters. I'll have any number of men here in awhile that are used to the swamp. You stay at the camp and we'll work out from there."

Ten minutes after Bernie started back for the camp with Peters, an apparition came backtracking down their trail, following Cooter Wade. Ed Masters had seen Joe Turtle—no man in Clay County knew his real name—a dozen times in his life. In spite of that, he was briefly startled when he saw the man now. Joe Turtle was tall and gaunt with a head too small for his body. His nose was beaked and bony, a wedge of flesh with nostrils, the bigger because it was not balanced by a measurable chin. The face became a mouth and from a mouth it became wattled neck with no dividing line. Masters thought, as he had thought before, by God he does look like a turtle. The eyes were hooded and seemed to contain all the ancient evil of the ante-diluvian. Not fair, Masters thought, for a man to judge another man on the appearance that God has fastened on him through no fault of his own. People did though. Joe Turtle had been used to frighten just about every child in Clay County into obedience at one time or another. Old Raw Head and Bloody Bones will get you. Old Joe Turtle will get you. Actually, Masters supposed, he was harmless enough. People must have called him names and laughed at him long ago. Drove him into the swamp. Called him a turtle and—was it cause or effect?—Joe just about took up with turtles. Whenever a kid or a fisherman caught a real big lunker of a snapper, Joe seemed to sense it. He'd show up and ask, in his halting

way, if he could have it. Most times he could and he'd put it in his boat and take it along with him to turn it loose in the pond in the rear of his shanty. Had the name, he'd have the game. Joe Turtle. Somewhere in back of him there were people, relatives. At any rate, once a month a check came to him in the mail from up North somewhere. Conscience money, maybe. Somebody glad that ugly Joe stayed down in the swamps and didn't make them ashamed. Pretty sizeable check, too, some said, though Joe never seemed to spend any money to speak of.

Masters said, "Joe, there's a little boy lost out in the swamp. You and Cooter know the Woman better than anyone else. Thought maybe you'd help."

Joe Turtle grunted. "Do what I can."

Cooter said jealously, "Don't know her as well as I do. I been here longer'n him."

Masters said, "Maybe. The dogs trailed the boy as far as right here. Look around. See if you can see any sign a boat was pulled in hereabouts."

Cooter Wade bent to examine the water's edge. After a moment he straightened up. "I can't tell," he reported. "Maybe there was a boat here and maybe not. Just 'cause the dogs lost the track here don't mean anything. He could have kept going along the edge of the reach."

"What do you think, Joe?" Masters asked.

Joe Turtle's voice was rusty from disuse—who did he have to talk to, living the way he did?—as he said, "No boat here," with immense conviction.

Masters said wearily, "You two men go on ahead then. See if you can pick up any tracks along the edge of the reach. I'll get some men out here and we'll get a real search going. Holler to the boy once in awhile. Name is Howard. If you find him, one of you run on back to the camp while the other brings the boy. Any case, you come on back to the camp by sundown. I'll need you then."

In the next two hours, Masters arranged for a State Police radio unit to base at the fish camp. He contacted Deputy Tom Dunn and made a radio appeal for volunteers who knew the swamp to help in the search. He asked for and received a detachment of Rangers from Fort Benning. By sundown, when Joe Turtle and Cooter Wade reported back

empty handed, he had fifty men to throw into the search. It was soon apparent that they could make little progress in the darkness. Crying Woman swallowed the rays of their flashlights as disdainfully as she swallowed the sounds of their floundering. By dawn, Masters had two hundred men in the swamp and a brace of Army helicopters hovering overhead like a pair of dragonflies.

When nightfall of the second day arrived, men began to struggle out of the swamp, bone tired and scratched and torn by the Woman. The confident optimism of the morning was burned out. Here and there a man said that it was foolish to keep trying. Boy fell into a sink hole, prob'ly. Rattlesnake might have got him or even maybe a big 'gator. Could be he tried to swim across a slough to find his way back to camp and got sucked under. Any way you looked at it, a man just couldn't stay in there another night.

On the third day, Masters' volunteers were less than half the number that had plunged ahead the previous day. On the fourth day, Masters dismissed the soldiers with thanks and sent for Sam Peters.

Peters approached in the shambling shuffle of an old man. His eyes were red-rimmed, in a haggard face. Masters said straight out, "Mr. Peters, I've done all I can. These people have gone further into the swamp than any man ever went before. I got to tell you. I don't think your boy is alive in there." Remembering how Peters had clung to the telephone waiting for word that Howie had been picked up, how he had run forward to meet each party of men as they struggled out of the swamp—always with the same hopefully eager question on his lips—he felt an enormous pity for the man that was only slightly diluted by his preoccupation with another line of thought.

Peters stared at the floor. "It doesn't seem Christian just to go away and leave him," he mumbled. "I guess you know best, Sheriff. You don't think we ought to keep trying?"

Masters silently shook his head.

Peters nodded. "I know. And I appreciate what you've done. If there were some way to do it, I'd like to thank all the men who helped."

Masters said, "You don't have to do that, Peters. They know how you feel."

"I guess so." Peters seemed unable to lift his head. He hesitated and then continued absently, "His mother. She's at the hotel in Clay City. Wanted to come out here, but I told her best not. Seems like it's

harder this way, not finding him, even dead. We got nothing of him to take with us."

Cooter Wade and Joe Turtle had been with Masters when he sent for Peters. Cooter said eagerly, "Way you feel, Mister Peters, maybe you'd like me to keep on hunting for him. The Sheriff, here, will tell you how good I know the Woman."

Masters said distastefully, "You know the swamp but—"

Sam Peters, snatching at any straw, interrupted. "You do that," he said. "I'll be glad to pay you for your trouble. If you find—anything—the Sheriff'll tell you how to get in touch with me. You know how he was dressed, what he looks like?"

Cooter said, "Sure I do. Red plaid shirt and blue jeans. Skinny sort of blond-headed youngster. There ain't apt to be any other kid in there anyway." He turned toward Joe Turtle who had been standing impassively silent. "What about you, Joe? You want to help?"

Joe shook his head. "Ain't any use. I got to get back to my place."

Cooter seemed slightly relieved. "Just thought you might like to make a little extra something. You'd rather get back to your mud turtles, you go ahead. I don't need any help."

Masters, weary and dirty, went straight to his home after closing out the search. He bathed and shaved and changed his clothes, but he felt no lift at all when this was done. He drove down to his office, nodded to Deputy Tom Dunn, but said nothing for half an hour. Instead he sat with his feet on the desk, bitterly reproaching himself for a gross error of omission. Finally, he spoke.

"Tom," he asked, "what do you think happened to that boy?"

Dunn, startled, said, "Why, I'd guess he drowned, probably, trying to cross a slough."

Masters nodded. "That's what I thought. But I've been thinking. Three times we went in there with the dogs, looking for people. Three times the dogs lost the scent. Those are good dogs, Tom. That Doc hound has found nearly fifty people. This particular time, they lost it so quick it was like a boat picked that boy up. I think that that's just what happened."

Dunn stared at the Sheriff. "Why, for God's sake? If somebody picked him up, they'd have brought him to the camp or at least called this office."

Masters said glumly, "I've been a damn fool. The Woman is such a terrible thing, we suspect her right away. Like yourself. Can't see beyond the sloughs and the sinkholes and saw grass. There's something worse than any of them in the swamp." Masters stood up. "You go out and get some coffee for us. I've got some calls to make. Fore you go, give me that list of County Sheriffs out of your desk."

When Dunn left to get coffee, Masters was already on the telephone, a pad of paper and a pencil before him. He was still bent over the desk when Dunn returned, and he reached for his cup without speaking to the Deputy. Dunn went about his own work, glancing curiously at Masters from time to time. After making an interminable number of telephone calls, Masters finally walked over to the files, where the reports of his office were kept. He took the files, Dunn noticed, from years back—material that no one had looked at in a long, long time. He carried the papers back to his desk and studied them for all of an hour. It was full dark before he pushed them away and reached for his pipe.

"Tom," he said, "how many counties butt onto Crying Woman?"

Dunn thought for a moment. "Let's see. Clay, of course. Buford and Pickens and Oconee and a thin slice of Tyogee. And Prater."

Masters nodded. "I'll ask you another one. How many people got lost in Crying Woman and never were found? I mean, just from Clay County."

"Three that I know of, since you've been Sheriff. Let's see—there was another one, about six years back. And then there was that old timer from the Civil War home that they always thought wandered in there. Five, maybe?"

"Not five. In the last ten years, there've been seven. Three in my time, four before that. One was found alive. No trace was ever found of the other six. That's beyond all sense, Tom, but it could be accident, coincidence—whatever you want to call it. I've talked to Sheriff Moon over in Pickens County, and all four of the other Sheriffs." Masters glanced at the pad on his desk. "This is the score. Buford, four. Pickens, seven. Oconee another four and Tyogee, two. Prater County has five. That's for a ten-year period and counting only the people that disappeared and were never found."

Dunn said disbelievingly, "That's—let's see—twenty-nine people. That's impossible, Ed!"

The Sheriff shook his head, his jaw clenched tightly on his pipestem. "It's not impossible because it happened. Little at a time, one here, one there, nobody added up. It's impossible for it to be accidental."

Dunn demanded, still refusing to believe Master's figures, "Why? It don't make sense. What could happen to that many people? You think there's some monster in that swamp?"

Masters said grimly, "I do. An old swamp rat gone crazy."

"But for what, Ed? Who were those people? Mostly youngsters, weren't they? They wouldn't have any money on them."

"Some of them were men that wandered off from fishing parties. Most were kids. The men might have carried a few dollars." Masters walked over to the gun cabinet. This time he selected a shotgun in addition to the little snake pistol. Turning back to Dunn he said, "I hired Cooter Wade for a dollar and a half an hour as a tracker. For the time he put in, the County owes him sixty some odd dollars. Time before it was seventy. Time before that forty-five. The other Sheriffs all have a few old swamp hands they call in whenever they have to run a search party. Cooter's been in on all but a couple of the twenty-nine I told you about."

Dunn, not wanting to believe what he was hearing, said, "It could be just accidental, Ed. He's probably got a radio. Whenever he hears about somebody being lost in the swamp, he most likely goes over and volunteers to work. You got to admit he knows the swamp."

"So do some of the other swamp rats. But none of them ever showed up on more than half a dozen searches." Masters opened a closet and took out a battery light. "Get the jailer up here to keep store," he said. "We're going to find out about Cooter."

On the way out to Luther's fish camp, their planned base of operations, Masters had little to say. Dunn seemed stunned at the magnitude of the crime Masters had outlined. "You mean," he said, "that Cooter'd toll them off into some sinkhole or bog where their bodies would sink and never be found, and then he'd show up to help search?"

Masters said, "I think that was the way of it. Then he'd say he heard about it on the radio, the way you suggested. Sometimes they even sent for him to help. He showed up to hunt for the Peters boy with a story about putting in to borrow some gas." He paused. "Been thinking we'll wait 'til daylight before we go after him."

Bass Luther come out to meet them, drawn by the headlights of the county car. Masters said, "I'd like you to put us up for the night, Bass. Then; first thing in the morning, I'd like to take a skiff with an outboard."

Bass said, "Sure, Ed." He was curious, quite obviously, but back-country reserve kept him from asking the Sheriff why he wanted the boat at such an early hour.

By sunup of the following day, Masters and Tom Dunn were headed for Cooter Wade's shanty, the roaring clatter of the outboard sounding unnaturally loud in the morning quiet. Misty vapor was still rising spectrally from the water when they rounded a bend in the reach they were following and saw Cooter's rickety landing. Cooter was already up; he was on his knees in his narrow-beamed skiff, his back bending rhythmically up and down.

Tom Dunn asked curiously, "What's he doing?"

Masters said, "Bailing. Had some rain about two this morning." He paused and then continued, "Tom, you know Cooter's type. If I take him in to question him, he'll close his mouth and never open it again. I've been thinking about it and I've got an idea. You let me do the talking and no matter what I say, you go along with it."

Masters cut the motor and the skiff glided neatly in beside Wade's boat. "Morning, Sheriff," Wade said. "What brings you out so early?" He continued scooping the last few pints of water from the boat, leaning to one side to deepen the water and scraping the bottom with an empty tortoise shell, the usual swamper's bailer. He acted completely unconcerned, Masters thought.

Masters said, "We were out to see Bass Luther, Cooter. Long as we were so close, I thought I'd drop by and tell you about the reward."

Cooter glanced up alertly. "Reward? What reward?"

Masters lit his pipe carefully. "Reward for the Peters boy. His pa is pretty convinced he's dead, same as all of us. To make the boy's mother feel better, he's offered a reward of a thousand dollars if he's found alive. Five hundred for the body if he's dead. That way they'll be sure, one way or another." He wrapped the starting cord around the flywheel, preparing to start the outboard. "See you, Cooter," he said.

Cooter stood up. "Why, I'll try to find that boy just to make his pa rest easy," he said. "You just know I'll try, Sheriff."

When they were headed back for the fish camp, Tom Dunn said, "I don't see what good that'll do, Ed. Peters didn't offer any reward."

Masters shrugged. "Might not do any good at all. Still, Cooter loves money. Everything he does points it out. If he killed that boy and hid the body where he might be able to recover it, he isn't going to be able to stop thinking about that reward money until he's tried to get it. I think maybe he'll show up in a day or so with a story about finding the body floating somewhere. Cooter doesn't understand about microscopes and autopsies and such. Fact is, I don't think he can even read or write. He surely won't guess what the coroner will be able to find out from that body if he brings it in. Coroner'll find out enough—the way he probably killed him—so that it won't make much difference if he talks or not."

Tom Dunn grinned. "That's clever, Ed. That's surely clever. It would be better still if we could follow him when he goes after the body."

Masters shook his head. "We can't chance it," he said. "Cooter is swamp wise. We couldn't stay within a half mile of him without him knowing we were there. We can't risk scaring him off, making him suspicious."

Dunn nodded. "All we can do, then, is sit back and wait until he finds the body."

They left the skiff at Bass Luther's place and went on back to town. Masters had other routine work to do, but he was unable to concentrate on it. And Tom Dunn was infected with the same uneasiness. Both men jumped for the telephone each time it rang, assuming that Cooter Wade, if he found the body of the Peters boy, would bring it to Bass Luther's landing and call in from that point. A half-hour before sundown, the telephone rang for the twentieth time that day; with unflagging eagerness Tom Dunn picked it up. After a moment he handed the receiver to the Sheriff. "For you, Ed," he said. "Bass Luther."

Masters said, "Ed Masters, here. What's on your mind, Bass? Cooter Wade turn up there?"

He listened briefly and then said, "We'll be right out," and hung up. He turned to Tom Dunn. "Cooter's there," he said. "Drifted down past the landing in his skiff. *Dead*. Bass rowed out and towed him in."

The Sheriff and the Deputy arrived at the fish camp while the last glow of the sunset was fading in the west. The same little group of men

that had gathered there four days before were standing beside Cooter Wade's boat. Bass Luther said, "There he is, Ed. Just the way I found him. We didn't touch anything."

Masters shone his light into the skiff. Cooter Wade lay huddled across a thwart, his face upturned. The eyes were open and the thin lips were drawn back from the yellow teeth in a grimace of pain and hatred, as if Cooter had fought against death with his last heartbeat. One hand clutched the tortoise shell bailer; the other was outflung with the fingers curled into the palm save for the index finger which pointed eternally at nothing. Cooter's bony knees were doubled under his body. Against the thin blue denim of the back of his shirt, a red patch showed with three darker circles of red at regular intervals of an inch or so within the larger splotch.

Bass Luther said slowly, "Fish gig. Somebody drove a fish gig into his back while he was bent over bailing his boat."

Masters nodded. The holes in Cooter's back could very well have been made by the tines of a fish gig—and there wouldn't be a man in Crying Woman who didn't own a fish gig.

Tom Dunn said, "He died hard. Look at the expression on his face."

Masters was staring intently at Cooter's body. Something in the ugly picture was wrong, off key. It evaded him for a moment and then it came into focus. He said sharply, "Look at the bottom of the boat. It's bone dry. Cooter bailed the rain out of it this morning and the sun dried up the little that was left."

Tom Dunn's voice reflected bewilderment. "What's he got the bailer in his hand for, if the boat's dry? Unless he picked it up to try and heave it at somebody."

Masters shook his head. "He's got his own gig in the boat. If he had strength enough to throw anything, he'd have reached for that. No, he must've been trying to tell us something." The Sheriff's eyes narrowed. "By God," he said, struck with awe by an idea that had occurred to him. He turned to Bass Luther. "What did Cooter make the bailer out of?"

Bass said, "Why, an old turtle shell, same as we all do that own boats."

"It's a tortoise shell, not one off a turtle," Masters said. "But you called it a turtle shell. Cooter'd call it that too. That's why he could make use of it in what he was trying to tell us." He wheeled and said

to Tom Dunn, "Get the battery light and the guns from the car. Quick, man!" When Tom had gone he turned back to Bass Luther. "What's the fastest boat you've got? The air boat?"

Bass nodded. "It's got good lights too."

"Get it started," Masters said. A sick, black possibility had occurred to him. Cooter Wade. Joe Turtle. A connection that could only be horrible.

In five minutes, they were gliding up the reach that led toward Joe Turtle's shanty. Over the roar of the propeller, Tom Dunn said, "I can't get over it. Joe Turtle. Why would he kill Cooter?"

Masters said, "The boat came drifting down the reach. Cooter must have been up around Joe Turtle's place. You know what he was after as a result of my little talk with him. Bass, see if you can get a little more speed out of this thing. Both of you, when we get there have your guns ready."

Masters remembered Joe Turtle's shanty from a past excursion. A weatherbeaten, flimsy structure, cousin to any of a hundred shanties except for the mud pond behind it. The pond was perhaps a hundred yards across; the water was about three or four feet deep, with a tiny marshy island near dead center. What outlined it was the crude palisade of woven sticks that Joe Turtle had built around it. In the pond he kept his turtles. There must be hundreds of them in there, Masters supposed. Nobody knew why he kept them. He didn't eat them, as far as anyone knew.

When they were a hundred yards from the place, they could smell the stench of the turtle pond. Dunn said, "Crazy ol' gaffer. Why do you suppose he keeps them, Ed?"

"I don't know," Masters said. "Ease her in, now, Bass. He knows we're coming by this time."

The moment the boat touched shore, Masters leaped for the path that led up to Joe Turtle's shanty, shining the battery light with one hand and holding the shotgun ready with the other. "Joel" he cried. "Joe Turtle! This is Sheriff Masters. You come out here. Now." When there was no answer, Masters ran toward the shanty, moving as fast as he could go while Bass Luther and Tom Dunn panted after him. Masters burst in the flimsy screen door, the powerful battery light lighting the room with a garish intensity. The room was empty, but from the rear of the shanty came the sound of splashing. "Dunn!" Masters

roared. "Bass! He's trying to cross the pond! Get him!" There was a door on the far side of the room, leading into another room. Masters broke through it with one lunge. There was a cot in the room. On it, his hands and feet bound, lay a small boy dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt. As Masters broke into the room, he tried to sit up.

Masters said, "You just hold on, son. It's going to be all right," and raced from the shanty.

Tom Dunn and Bass Luther were staring along the beam of the Deputy's flashlight. Masters swung the stronger battery light into play. At the end of its beam, he could see Joe Turtle clambering out of the mud onto the small island in the center of the pond. He called, "You coming back here, Joe, or do I get you?"

Joe Turtle turned and blinked into the light. He hissed at them. Like a cat. Like a snake. Like a turtle.

Tom Dunn muttered, "I wouldn't cross that pond for any money. There's snapping turtles in there bigger'n me."

Masters said, "I got to do it. Unless we drag his skiff over here."

Bass said, "We better do just that, Ed. He's crazy. It'll more'n likely take all three of us to get him. Was me, I'd just shoot him and get it over with."

Four hours later, Tom Dunn and Masters sat alone in the Sheriff's office. When the Deputy offered to get coffee, Masters shook his head. "I think we earned something stronger," he said and reached for the bottom drawer of his desk. "Shine," he mused. "None too strong at that."

Dunn, after he had had a drink, said, "One thing I don't understand, Ed. How did you know the boy would still be alive?"

Masters poured another drink of oily moonshine into a coffee cup and studied it. "That story I told Cooter about there being a reward for the boy's body. Cooter, knowing what he knew, would have known that either the boy would be alive or there wouldn't be any body. Cooter tolled the boy into his boat and kidnapped him in the first place. He brought him out to Joe Turtle, just like he's brought Lord knows how many others. Joe paid him to do it, and then Cooter would turn around and hire out to the county to help search. This time Cooter wanted the reward. He went out to Joe Turtle's place and tried to get the boy. He'd have had to drown him before he brought him in, of

course. Joe Turtle caught him at it. From what sense I can make out of what he says, I get the idea that he resents that more than anything else about this whole thing. He *paid* for the boy. My God, how he must have hated people."

Dunn shook his head. "I guess so," he said. He paused. "Ed, what do you mean by saying Cooter knew that either the boy would be alive or there wouldn't be any body? What did Joe do with them?"

Masters stood up. "If you can't figure it out," he said, "you're liable to sleep better tonight than I will."

Dunn thought for a moment, then. "Oh, for God's sake," he said. "Oh, for God's sake."



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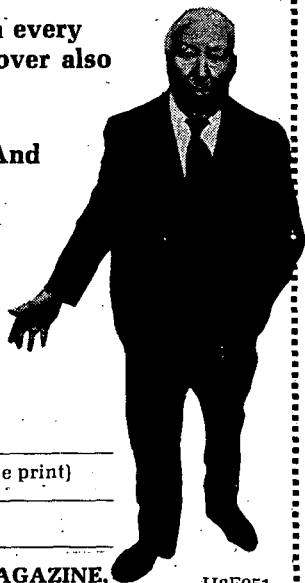
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Murder Between Friends

by Nedra Tyre

Over their mid-morning coffee Mrs. Harrison and Mrs. Franklin settled down to discuss how they were going to murder their landlord, Mr. Shafer. The day before they had decided that murdering him was the only sane thing to do.

"I believe I'll have a little more sugar for my coffee, please, Matilda," Mrs. Franklin said. At this late date, she was seventy-six, there was nothing she could do about her sweet tooth. "These are the best cheese straws I've ever put in my mouth. You've got to be a born cook to have them turn out this way. Time and again I've followed your recipe exactly, but mine aren't anything like these."

Mrs. Harrison beamed. It was a pleasure to give a little treat to such an amiable person as Mary Sue Franklin, a friend ever since the second grade.

They ate cheese straws and sipped coffee, then wiped their mouths daintily and got down to the business of Mr. Shafer's murder.

"Well, we can't do it with a gun, that's for sure," Mrs. Harrison said. "A gun scares me to death just to look at it. I couldn't bring myself to pull the trigger. Besides, where on earth would we get one? You have to have a permit to buy one and a license to shoot it."

"No, a gun is out," Mrs. Franklin agreed. Then she sighed. "You read a lot about murder, but when you come right down to it, it's hard to plan one."

Even as they talked they could hear Mr. Shafer thundering like a minotaur up and down the halls looking for his next victim.

"I'll take another cheese straw, Matilda, and then I've got to go to the store. Can I get anything for you? I'll be glad to."

"No, thank you, Mary Sue. But tomorrow we've got to get down to

brass tacks. Mr. Shafer gets meaner every day."

They finished their coffee. Mrs. Franklin offered to wash up, but Mrs. Harrison wouldn't hear of it. So Mrs. Franklin went back down the hall to her own tiny room and kitchenette to get her shopping bag. She bumped right into Mr. Shafer, who was coming up the back stairway.

"What you old biddies been yakking about today?" he boomed out at her. "Are you planning to overthrow the government?"

Mrs. Franklin liked banter. A woman never got too old to do a bit of discreet, ladylike flirting. But no light exchange was possible with Mr. Shafer. She smiled her sweetest smile and gave a little bow. "No, my dear," she said in the most genteel conversational tone, "we've been trying to decide how to murder you."

Mr. Shafer paid no attention. He never did pay any attention to what anyone said. "Damned old biddies," he muttered, and stalked on past. "Why is the world so cluttered up with old women?"

He turned out the little glow-worm of a light in that part of the hall. He slammed a door somewhere. Even the house shuddered; and he had no business being there at all. The place had belonged to his wife and when she had died it had been willed to their daughter, but Mr. Shafer made the daughter so miserable that she'd left after one of his scenes. Then he had taken over everything.

The next morning the old friends talked again about murdering Mr. Shafer.

Mrs. Franklin asked, as usual, for more sugar for her coffee. She told Mrs. Harrison that was the best apple pie she'd ever eaten.

"It's the cinnamon that makes the difference, that's all," Mrs. Harrison said modestly, "and a little lemon juice."

They finished their snack. They wiped their mouths delicately.

"Well, we can't poison Mr. Shafer," Mrs. Harrison said. "What do we know about poison?"

"We could learn," Mrs. Franklin answered.

"How could we learn, Mary Sue? If we go to the library and ask for books on poison they're sure to remember us. I know all the staff there. Anyway, when you buy poison the clerk keeps a record of it. The police could trace it straight to us."

Over their chocolate cake the next day, Mrs. Franklin said, "We certainly can't drown him." She was so enmeshed in the cake that she

wore a chocolate mustache and for the first time since they'd talked of murder she looked a bit sinister.

"No, I guess we can't drown him. There's no deep water anywhere but in the lake at the city park, and how could we get Mr. Shafer there?"

"He wouldn't go with us. He hates women."

"He hates everybody."

On Thursday when they had finished their pineapple upsidedown cake neither of them had any suggestion about how to kill Mr. Shafer.

"I feel so inept and inane, Mary Sue. We've got heads on our shoulders. It looks like we ought to be able to figure out something."

"Maybe we can tomorrow." Mrs. Franklin sounded optimistic.

"What about an axe?" Mrs. Harrison said the next day when they'd eaten every crumb of their cheese cake. "I woke up last night and it came to me plain as day. Why not an axe?" Her eyes brightened.

"Too messy," Mrs. Franklin said. "We'd ruin our clothes and even if we burned them the police would find the buttons and know they belonged to us."

"I don't mean chop him up," Mrs. Harrison said in alarm that her old friend had thought her capable of such an atrocity. "I just mean hit him on the head with it."

"But we don't have an axe, and if we bought one at the hardware store they'd be sure to remember and report it to the police."

"Now listen, Mary Sue, we've got to put on our thinking caps. We've got to figure out something soon. Mr. Shafer put poor Mrs. Grove out day before yesterday because she wouldn't get rid of her cat, and last night he made Mr. Floyd leave because he said he wheezed too much with his asthma."

"Well, have you thought of a way, Matilda?"

"No, I haven't, Mary Sue. But we will. I just know we will. While we're stuck about a method, there're still lots of other things we could be working on. We've got to figure out when the best time to do it will be. In a rooming house full of people we'll have to draw up some kind of time scheme so no one will be around to see us."

They spent a week devising a time schedule, snooping on the coming and going of the other tenants.

They didn't seem to doubt that they would succeed in their plan. They talked as if their murder was over and done with.

"It's sort of sad," Mrs. Harrison said. "Not a soul in this world will mourn Mr. Shafer."

"Not a tear will be shed for him," Mrs. Franklin said.

"Do you think we ought to send flowers to the funeral?"

"Good gracious, Matilda, I never once thought of that. I just don't know."

"Why not chip in together and send a potted lily? A big floral offering might look like gloating."

"Of course, we've got to go to the service."

"Yes, we'll have to or the rest of the people in the house might get suspicious. But don't you think it would look better if we sat more toward the back of the church than the front?"

"I believe about midway would be the best."

"I've thought of it, Matilda," Mrs. Franklin said when she was on her second piece of pecan pie. "It's simple. I'm surprised we haven't thought of it before. Can't you guess?"

"Surely it's not any of the ways we've already talked about."

"Of course not. We couldn't use any of them. We'd be caught red-handed."

"Well, I just don't know. I hate to seem stupid, but I can't even make a good guess."

"A push."

"A push?"

"Yes, just shove Mr. Shafer down the stairs. The basement steps are steep and dark and he goes down there like clockwork every day at eleven. We could take him by surprise. Reach for the small of his back, or use a broom or a mop and give him a shove. The world would be rid of one of the meanest men who ever drew breath."

"Any day at eleven will do?"

"Yes, any day except Sunday, of course. We go to church at eleven then. We couldn't do it on Sunday. I've no intention of missing church just to do away with Mr. Shafer." Mrs. Franklin was flushed over having found their solution. It made her prettier than ever, almost childlike in appearance. No one would have believed that she had been seventy-six on January ninth.

"I've just thought of something, Mary Sue. That man, Mr. Allen, who moved in last week. He never leaves the place. He'd be here at eleven."

"He's no threat," Mrs. Franklin said. "He's hard of hearing. Besides, he's so engrossed in painting that nothing could budge him out of his room except an earthquake."

"Well, then, we'd better get it over with as soon as we can."

"The sooner the better," Mrs. Franklin said.

Of course they didn't mean it.

Or did they?

They longed for nerve enough to murder Mr. Shafer, but really they couldn't say boo to a goose. Mr. Shafer was mean, he was surly, he made them miserable, exactly as he made everyone else miserable. They wished they could just move out and be rid of him that way, but they'd looked and looked and couldn't find anything for what they could pay; anyhow they liked living where they were, near stores, near their church, near their doctor's office. They loved the old neighborhood, though it had deteriorated from family dwellings to rooming houses. If only they could get rid of Mr. Shafer and his cruelty. But they couldn't. They had just been whistling in the dark with all their talk of murder. They had just been playing with their imagination. It was their game, as if they were two bettors talking about winning a fortune when they didn't have a dollar between them.

Spring came the very next morning after Mrs. Franklin and Mrs. Harrison had decided that a push was the proper way to murder Mr. Shafer. They couldn't ignore the first warm day of spring. They postponed their usual morning coffee until afternoon. Mrs. Harrison said that she was heading for town to see what the new hats looked like, not that she could buy one. Mrs. Franklin sauntered off to see the daffodils and crocuses in the park.

Mr. Shafer heard them leave. "Darned old harpies," he said. "Maybe I can draw a breath with them out of the way for a while."

The only other person in the house then was Lawrence Allen, who lived in the room next to Mrs. Franklin. But he didn't hear the women go out even though the walls were thin. He couldn't hear very well. He didn't mind that he was growing deaf and that people had to shout at him. Nothing mattered so long as he kept his sight and could lift his right hand to paint. He had waited all his life to paint. He had refused to be a Sunday painter or an after-working-hours painter. Dabbling hadn't been for him. He had to be a dedicated painter every waking moment. Now that his youth and middle age and all their respon-

sibilities were over he could try to be a painter. He had supported his parents, then his own family; his wife was dead and his two sons were grown and with almost-grown children of their own. After a lifetime of meeting obligations, Allen owed nothing to anyone but himself. All he needed was a place to paint and painting material. He could get by on one meal a day. Nothing was going to stop him from painting, and after months of looking for a place with a proper light, and one that he could afford on his social security, he had found it. Life in one small room with one scanty meal was paradise.

He had just stretched a canvas and had picked up a brush when the door to his room flew open. Mr. Shafer filled the doorway.

"What in hell's going on in here? What's that stink?"

Even Allen's defective ears were outraged by Shafer's bellow.

"Get that muck out of here. This is a bedroom, not a workshop. I won't have it. It smells like a pigsty. It looks like a garbage dump. I had no idea this was going on. Get this junk out of here at once."

He stalked out of the room and walked down the hall. Allen dropped his brush. His hands jerked, his throat grew dry. He ran after Shafer.

"But you can't do this to me, Mr. Shafer. I've waited all my life to paint. I looked all over town for a room with a good light. You can't make me give it up. I won't go." His voice was a shriek. The dark, empty halls boomed with his shouted despair.

Shafer lumbered down the rear stairway. He shouted back to Allen, "I've told you once and for all. You and that damned muck have got to get out of here!"

Allen pursued him, entreating him to change his mind. Allen was distraught. He was possessed. He had to convince the man. He couldn't be put out. He couldn't. He wouldn't be. He babbled. He yelled. "Listen to me, Mr. Shafer! You've got to listen!"

The emotion in Allen's voice made Shafer turn around. "Get your muck out of here or I'll—" He didn't finish his threat. What he saw on Allen's face terrified him. He ran toward the back porch and when he had reached it he slammed the back door in Allen's face. He charged toward the steep basement stairs. It was exactly eleven o'clock—the time that Mrs. Franklin and Mrs. Harrison had decided would be the safest in which to murder him—when he rushed to descend the stairs, but fear over what he had seen on Allen's face made him falter. His foot missed the first step. He stumbled and sprawled.

Lawrence Allen didn't hear the fall. He was weak with rage and numb from the violence he had felt toward Shafer. But the slammed door had brought his sanity back. Thank God, he was in control of himself now. There was no telling what he might have done if Shafer hadn't shut the door. Allen walked back upstairs. He picked his brush up from the floor and began to paint. It steadied him, brought back his purpose and his optimism. Somehow or other he believed he would find a way to keep his room.

After Mr. Shafer's death Mrs. Harrison and Mrs. Franklin didn't have much to talk about to each other. It was as if they'd talked themselves out in planning Mr. Shafer's murder. Mr. Shafer's pleasant daughter came back and took over the house. It was a happy place then. Mrs. Grove and her cat returned, and Mr. Floyd and his asthma. Mr. Shafer's daughter didn't mind Mr. Allen's painting. In fact, she encouraged him, even sat for him. It wasn't any time before he had two pictures accepted for the Annual State Exhibit.

Mary Sue Franklin and Matilda Harrison were still devoted friends, but a bit miffed with each other. Sometimes Mrs. Harrison's blood boiled a little. Accidental death, her foot, let the poor benighted police think that if they chose. But of course Mary Sue Franklin had done it. Mary Sue's lie didn't fool Mrs. Harrison at all—she hadn't gone to the park that day. She'd sneaked back the moment Mrs. Harrison had left and shoved Mr. Shafer down the stairs just as they'd planned.

As for Mrs. Franklin, she was put out because the method of the murder had been something she'd worked out all by herself, with no help from Matilda Harrison, yet Matilda had gone ahead with it all by herself, as if it had been her own idea. Mrs. Franklin had thought Mrs. Harrison was shy. She was surprised that Matilda had turned out to be the pushy type—not that she meant to make a pun. Well, that just proved that you never could tell about anyone, not even your best friend. Imagine, saying she was going to town to look at new hats, when all the time she had been hiding in the back hall waiting to shove Mr. Shafer to Kingdom Come.

The old friends kept on having their morning coffee together, but they were careful not to turn their backs on each other, and when they looked straight into each other's eyes, each was dead sure she saw a murderer.

Final Exam

by Allen Kim Lang

The plane kicked up rainbows as it slapped the lake. It coasted to the pier and pulled up short on reversed propellers. Gill, lawyer-looking in his black city suit and his bowler, opened the hatch and waved to the two who were waiting. He tucked the briefcase under his arm and leaped to the dock. That it contained a tiny, gold-encrusted Astra automatic was responsible for the way he held onto it. The girl walked up with Freistoffer. "It's a pleasure to meet you again, Miss Katie," Gill said, removing his derby. "Good morning, boss."

"Morning," Freistoffer said. He turned to shout at the pilot. "Be back here tomorrow at noon!" The pilot saluted and released his plane. It catapulted across the lake, rising on its floats till they skimmed foam; it disappeared across the pines. "Have to get you out of that mortician's uniform, partner," Freistoffer said, opening the door to his cottage. "Katie, pick out some vacation-with-pay clothes for Gill."

Katie nodded and went to the bedroom, coming back with a stack of freshly-laundered clothes. "These should fit you," she said. "I'll have breakfast ready by the time you've washed and changed."

"Thank you," Gill said. "Felix, where did you find this housekeeping paragon of yours?"

"You'd never believe it to see her now, all civilized and lovable," Freistoffer said, "But the night I met Katie, she was playing the title bit in *The Taming of the Shrew*. I went backstage and persuaded her that Freistoffer had more to offer a girl than Shakespeare." He put an arm across Katie's shoulders. "She's a fine actress, Gill," he said. "If the play says she's supposed to cry, Katie cries. Real tears."

"With the Method, tears are easy," Katie said. She went over to the stove and turned on the gas. "All I have to do for tears is remember."

Gill stared at the girl. She wore a tight blouse, crisp as paper, under an abbreviated vest; and her treader pants fit like blue velvet paint. "I'd better wash and change," he said, forcing himself to look away from her.

Katie transferred the sausage and eggs from her frying-pan to the breakfast plates the instant Gill reappeared, flamboyant in the scarlet Bermuda shorts and Hawaiian shirt he'd borrowed. "I feel like a tropical weed in this costume," he said.

"With those stems you could pass for a weed," Freistoffer said. He and Gill began eating while Katie poured the coffee. "Sit down, Katie. I want to tell Gill about us," Freistoffer said. "Gill, Katie and I are going to be married."

Gill looked at his boss, and looked at the girl, and made himself smile. "Congratulations," he said.

"Thanks," Freistoffer said. "I made a will before Katie and I came up here. It gives her control of everything—jukeboxes, happydust, moonshine—when I go. Of course I anticipate having many years of community-service before me, but I like to be prepared."

"You're a young man yet, Felix," Gill said.

"Cut the snow-job, Junior. Nowadays, I feel flattered when someone refers to me as 'middle-aged.'" Freistoffer grinned. "Point is, I've got a will now, and it names you executor of my estate. Okay?"

Gill set down his coffee cup and stood. "I'm happy you have such confidence in me, but what's come of the 'partner' talk you've been so flip with?" he asked. "I'm still just one of the help, Felix. I want a share of the machine."

"The machine just isn't up for grabs, Gill," Freistoffer said.

"I'm worth a partnership," Gill said, his fists planted deep in the pockets of the scarlet shorts.

"I never elected you Crown Prince," Freistoffer said. "What makes you think you can ease the old bull out to pasture and run the herd yourself?"

"The fact that you're thirty years older than I am, that's what," Gill said. "The outfit needs young blood."

"Young blood spills cheap," Freistoffer said. "How do you think I got to the top of the dirtiest, meanest business there is? Hear me, Squirt: I was machine-gunned in K.C. in '29, and lived to send lilies to the widows of the guys in the gun-car. Someone who wanted part of my

machine hired a hophead to throw nitric acid in my face. I wore a chemical tan for three years. I was kidnapped in '32 by the Purples and sat tied to a chair for two days while they asked me questions about my business and put out their cigarettes on my tongue. They were chain-smokers, Junior." Freistoffer jumped up and stripped off his shirt. He parted the grizzled fur to display a channel of twisted flesh that ran across one side of his chest. "Take a good look," he said. "That's where the medics took out a busted bullet and the rib that split it, right over my heart. Now let's see your battlescars, Young-Blood."

Katie pressed up to Freistoffer and very gently kissed him. "Maybe Gill thinks you've lost your grip, Felix," she said. "But we know better, you and I."

"Damned right," Freistoffer growled. He pulled the shirt back on. "Do you get my point, Gill?" he asked.

"The point seems to be I'd better shop for a new job," Gill said.

"No, Gill," Freistoffer said. "I could get along without you, but I like your work. So you're not all scarred up; so you don't have any stars on your battle-ribbons—what the hell? By the time you got into the business, everything was cool. My jungle has been pruned to a playground. Guns have gone out of style. If my boys have to work with their hands nowadays, they wear kidskin on their fingers instead of brass." Freistoffer squeezed Gill's shoulders. "I didn't fly you eight hundred miles to fight with you," he said. "You're still my right hand, Gill, my sergeant-major, my chief defense against those bone-stripping piranhas in the Internal Revenue Service. Stick with me, boy. The Freistoffer outfit is the AT&T of the rackets."

"I'll stick, Felix," Gill said, "and I'll keep nagging you for a share in the business."

"If the two of you are friends again," Katie said, "how about the three of us going for a swim? The water's like ice, and the sun's like whiskey. They should go good together."

"I'd love to, Katie," Gill said, "but I can't swim."

"That's what you get for spending your tender years at the pool-hall instead of the pool," Freistoffer said.

"I'll help Gill clean up the dishes," Katie said. "Go on out, Felix. Soak up sun and digest breakfast. I'll be right along."

Freistoffer changed to swim-trunks and trotted out to the pier to lie on a towel, his broad back the color of prime-leaf tobacco, veined with

the white claw-marks of the criminal jungle he'd fought through to become its king. "He's a tough old bird," Gill said, looking at him through the window.

"He's chrome steel," Katie said, slipping the dishes into the soapy water. "He's the last of the dinosaurs."

"Do you love him, Katie?"

She shook her head. "No, but I'm going to marry him," she said. "Felix won't be a teddy-bear husband. He's strong."

Gill put an arm around Katie's waist and drew her close. "I hate to see you set up as chief nurse in a one-man old-people's home," he said.

"Let me go, Gill," Katie said. "If I scream for Felix, he'll rip that arm off-you at the shoulder."

Gill let go. "Okay," he said. "You can be the dinosaur's bride. I just happen to think that's an awful price to pay for security."

"Don't sing to me about True Love," Katie said. "If I leave Felix, I lose the lead role in the fattest will in the State of Illinois. I go back to drawing Equity minimum, to playing ingenues till my Social Security checks start, to crying real tears all the way. Thanks, Gill, but no thanks."

"Hey, Katie!" Freistoffer bellowed from the pier.

She went to the door. "Be right out!" she shouted. "Got to change!" She trotted into her bedroom and came back in a tiny, taunting swimsuit. "Hear me clear, Gill," she said. "Play cool. If Felix thinks you so much as notice I'm a girl, he'll chew you up and spit you out."

"For the record," Gill said, "I notice."

"So thanks," she said. "You want to hear something funny, Gill? Like I told you, I started with Felix because he's strong, because he makes me feel secure. Know how it turned out? I'm secure, all alone on my little private chain-gang; and I can't run away. Felix likes his prisoners to be loyal to him. Either they're loyal, or pretty soon they're dead."

"Maybe I could cut your chain, Katie," Gill said.

Katie touched his cheek for a moment, staring into his eyes. "Maybe you could," she said. "Trouble is, I'm not sure your chain-gang would be any better than Felix's." She turned and ran out the open door, out to the man in the sun on the pier.

Gill stared after her. Then he got his black leather briefcase, zipped

it open, and took out the tiny, gold-encrusted Astra automatic. Gill had gotten the pistol several birthdays ago, from a girl friend several girl friends ago. He slipped the little gun, its twelve ounces holding six doses of .25-caliber lead, into the hip pocket of his borrowed Bermudas, and pulled out the tail of the sportshirt to hide the change the gun made in his silhouette.

While his host swam and the dishes dripped dry, Gill explored the cabin. It was a small museum of guns. A Sharps Model 1878 carbine, a beautiful piece, was mounted over the fireplace. A dozen modern rifles, their stocks elaborately sculptured, gold and silver arabesques coiling about their receivers, were displayed behind the glass doors of a cabinet. There were four drawers below, where, in niches lined with jeweler's velvet, lay some forty handguns—tiny, watchlike automatics, long-snouted target revolvers, blued-steel .45 Colts, a free pistol with its handgrip carved to fit its owner like a glove, and a quartet of Luger's guns as wicked and perfect as ax-blades.

A locked cupboard beside this arsenal frustrated Gill's curiosity for only a moment. Working with the tiny tool he carried on his keychain, he picked the lock and opened the cupboard. It was filled with ammunition for the rifles and the handguns, and held two weapons unsuited to public display: drum-mounted Thompson submachine guns.

About noon, Gill ransacked the deep-freeze for provisions. Attracted by the aroma of his fresh-brewed coffee, Freistoffer and Katie came up from the lake. Gill brought them porkchops and potatoes, poured coffee, and joined them. At the center of the table, with a beer can as a vase, he'd placed a bouquet of wild flowers from the cabin's backyard, an irony on his domesticity. Freistoffer praised the flowers and Gill's cooking, and observed that his talents were not getting their fullest expression in bachelorhood. Then, stirring cream into his coffee, he sipped it. "Tastes funny," he said, staring at Gill.

"Mine is excellent," Katie said. "My, the lake is cold!"

"Here," Freistoffer said, shoving his coffee cup in front of Gill. "Taste this, partner."

"I've got my own coffee poured, Felix," Gill said.

"Taste it!" Freistoffer shouted.

Gill took a spoonful of the coffee from Freistoffer's cup and lifted it to his mouth. "Nothing wrong with it," he said.

"Finish the whole cup," Freistoffer said.

"Too much coffee keeps me awake nights," Gill said. "Besides, I like mine black."

Freistoffer jumped up from the table and fumbled in his gun-collection. He came back tapping a magazine into the butt of a Luger. "Drink the rest of my coffee, Junior," he said, pointing the nozzle of the gun at Gill's forehead.

"What are you, nuts?" Gill asked.

"Drink it!"

Gill upped the cup and drained it, then slammed it empty on its saucer. "Okay, Felix, lay down the hardware," he said. "It does taste funny." He started to get up.

"Sit down, Gill," Freistoffer said. "We'll let the cyanide take effect. Or was it arsenic? Watch him, Katie."

The girl picked up the creamer and sniffed at it. "Here's your cyanide, Felix," she said, pushing the little pitcher toward him. "This stuff has gone sour. Gill and I take our coffee black from the pot. You're the only one who uses cream."

Freistoffer dipped a finger into the cream and tasted it.

"Did you think I'd try to poison you, Felix?" Gill asked. "Is that why you pull a very un-Emily Post pistol at the lunch table?"

Freistoffer lowered the Luger. "I made a mistake," he admitted. "I'm sorry, Gill. Let's eat. Okay?" He cleared the pistol and returned it to its drawer.

Katie smiled. "Isn't anyone going to say grace?" she asked.

Katie pulled KP, while the two men wandered outside. Gill squinted up at the sun, grinning at it, and peeled off his shirt. He sneaked the little gun from his hip pocket into the bundled shirt to keep it hidden. "Look at me, Felix," he said. "White as fishbelly."

"Doctor I knew said he could tell the city people in the morgue," Freistoffer said. "Their skins were white and their lungs were black. You fish very much, Gill?"

"Only when I was a kid," he said. "We used to go down to Junk Creek with a twenty-cent bamboo pole and fish for pumpkinseed. Those are sunfish about the size of silver dollars, blue and orange with all the colors of the rainbow showing through their fins. Haven't seen one since my beard started."

"Might be pumpkinseed here," Freistoffer said. "Want to go out in the boat and try dropping a hook?"

"We might take some beer," Gill suggested, "so our time won't be wasted if the fish don't bite."

"Swell," Freistoffer said. "I'll put some beers in an onion-sack and borrow Katie's suntan lotion. We'll take the rowboat out. The outboard scares the fish."

Freistoffer insisted on doing the rowing. Gill sat in the bow, smearing himself with suntan lotion. Freistoffer leaned into the oars with the economy of an athlete. Near the middle, he tilted the oars in and dropped them to the bottom of the boat. He opened two beers and turned to hand one to Gill. "Out here is the best place to talk," he said. "Who's to eavesdrop?"

"Do you want to talk, or do you want to fish?"

"Frankly, fishing bores me," Freistoffer said. "Outwitting a cold-blooded beast that's got a brain the size of my thumbnail doesn't strike me as much of a challenge." He sucked his beer can dry and tossed it away from the boat. "Gill, now that we're out here talking man-to-man, and most privately, I might as well tell you that you've got me worried."

Gill held his empty beer can under the cold water till it filled, then let go of it. It swam silently down, becoming a gleaming speck thirty feet below. "You're the boss, Felix," he said. "I do what you tell me. So what about me worries you?"

"We'll sit out here till I get some straight answers from you, Junior," Freistoffer said. "You've been looking at Katie. Where'd you meet her before today?"

"In your office," Gill said. "Look, Felix, Katie is considerable woman. If you don't want the help staring at her, you should hire a crew of Civil War veterans to work for you."

"You figure she's part of the estate, don't you?" Freistoffer asked. "I die, Katie gets the business, you get Katie. Right?"

"I figure nothing of the sort," Gill said. "Let's go back in, Felix." He stood to switch seats with the older man, carrying his bundled shirt. "Move back here; I'll row us home."

"That's what you say," Freistoffer growled. He lifted the right oar from its lock and raised it as a club. "I guess you'll never get to know Katie really well, Gill," he said, and swung the oar.

Gill plucked the little automatic out of his wadded shirt and fired one round past Freistoffer's head. The oar dropped beside the boat.

"Fish it out, Felix," Gill said. "Now, I want you to row home with a slow, even stroke that won't excite my anxieties."

"I could turn the boat over," Freistoffer said. "You can't swim; I can."

"After I'd punched five fast holes in you to let in lake-water, you'd break no records," Gill said. "Take us home, Felix."

Katie stood on the pier, holding a pair of binoculars. "What happened out there?" she demanded. "I heard a shot."

"Gill just declared war, baby," Freistoffer said. "Gill, you'd be better off drowned. Believe me, Junior, if you pull that trigger and kill me right now you'll save yourself misery."

"It's a tempting notion, Felix, but I need time to get used to it," Gill said. Gripping the gun, he hoisted himself up after Freistoffer onto the pier. "We'll hold our truce-talks inside," he said.

"I don't believe in truces," Freistoffer said. "When that airplane comes down here tomorrow noon, there'll be three passengers waiting for it. One man, one girl, and one corpse. Which of us, Katie, would you prefer would be the corpse?"

"Either of you might win this feud," the girl said. "Put me down as an innocent bystander, Felix. Till the score's in, I stand neutral."

They walked up the hill to the cottage, Gill holding his Astra ready.

"If Gill should happen to kill me, Katie, what are your plans?" Freistoffer asked her.

"That's up to him," Katie said. "He might decide to kill me too. After all, Gill's a novice at murder."

"I'd never hurt you," Gill said.

"Your prospects boom, Katie," Freistoffer said. "Gill is a quarter-century younger than I. He has dignity and culture and manicured nails. He isn't quite a gentleman, Katie; but he's a well-polished book-keeper, something almost as good."

"Put down that melancholy violin, Felix," she said, "I'm an actress, but I never gave you the love-act. What I want is a strong man. Whichever of you is alive for that plane tomorrow will be a strong man."

"I find your jungle philosophy charming," Freistoffer said.

Gill sat across the room from Freistoffer. "Noon, tomorrow, is a long way off," he said.

Freistoffer grinned. "You should have killed me out in the boat, or

at the pier, as I told you to," he said. "You couldn't lose then. Now, you can."

Katie went into the kitchen and came back with a hammer and a handful of nails. She went to a bookshelf of gunlore, spilled the books onto the floor, and banged two of the shelves loose with the hammer. "If you're going to play Hatfield-and-McCoy," she said, "I'm going to build myself some insurance." She held one of the bookshelves across the drawers of the gun-cabinet and nailed it fast.

"That's solid walnut," Freistoffer exclaimed.

"And I'm solid girl," Katie said. "I'd rather see nailholes in walnut than bullet-holes in me." She tested her barricade and decided that it safely blocked the gun-drawers. "Now give me the key to the rifles, Felix," she ordered, holding out her hand.

"They're not loaded," he said.

"So give me the key and I can be sure." Freistoffer tossed Katie his keyring. She opened the cabinet and inspected each of the rifles. Satisfied that they were all clear of ammunition, she relocked the cabinet, took its key from the ring, and tossed the rest to Freistoffer. She investigated the antique Sharps carbine above the fireplace and found it, too, innocent of cartridges. "With only one gun on the loose," she said, "I know which way to duck."

In the evening, the three of them sat in the living room, the fire lighted, the Canadian night closing around the cabin.

"I may as well tell you, Gill," Freistoffer said, sprawled out on the sofa, "there's not a dream of patching up things between us. If we both survive to make that plane tomorrow—an unlikely prospect—I'll do my damndest to kick you out at six thousand feet. And if you somehow reach the city in spite of me, I'll post a ten-grand bounty on your ears."

"You talk glib, for a man without a gun," Gill said.

"Glib is the way I've lived," Freistoffer said.

"So what will we do till bedtime?" Katie asked. "Anybody for Monopoly?"

"Funny," Freistoffer said. He yawned. "Darned if all this running around in the fresh northern air hasn't made me sleepy," he said. "Goodnight, kiddies."

"Don't wander," Gill warned him. "I'm still the man with the gun."

"Better sit up and hold it, Gill," Freistoffer said. "There are lots of

ways to kill a sleeping gunman." He smiled and left for the master bedroom.

Gill helped Katie scoot the couch over in front of the gun-cabinets, where she'd elected to sleep. He reached across the couch toward the girl. "Stop it, Gill," she said. "I bet on winners, but only after they've won."

"Maybe I won't want you around after I've won," Gill said.

"Who'll pin the laurels to your hair, if not me?" she asked. She settled back on the couch and tugged her blanket up to her chin. "Happy dreams, Gill."

He prepared his bedchamber carefully. The door, of course, he locked, and secured further with a chair wedged beneath its knob. The window, barred by the ornamental ironwork rooted in the brick walls of the cottage, seemed secure against all intrusion larger than a bullet. Considering bullets, Gill took a second chair back into the closet, to the space left behind the hanging garments. This would be his bunk tonight. He wadded up a trenchcoat in the bed to serve as decoy for any murderous tricks Freistoffer might try during the night.

He sat back in the closet, half stifled by the curtain of clothes that pressed against his face, the little automatic squeezing against his belly with every breath. About midnight, so tired he'd have slept if there'd been a hacksaw rasping against the window-grill, Gill nodded, slumped against the wall, and dozed.

There was a crash of glass. Gill pounced to the floor under the clothes, grabbing the Astra from his belt. He crept out into the darkness. Bits of glass tinkled down from the window. Something moved outside the window. Gill fired twice. The something grunted. Gill fired another pair of shots toward it. He lay for ten minutes on the floor. Everything remained silent now. Cool air flowed in through the broken window. Trembling, Gill got up and went over to the bed. He tossed the dummy to the floor, tucked the automatic back under his belt, and slipped between the sheets.

The noise made Gill sit up and roll to the floor, his gun trained on the door. The pounding came again. "Awake, Gill?" Katie asked. Gill straightened up. "Be right out," he said.

"Just checking to see how many places I need to set for breakfast," Katie said.

Gill replaced the chairs, hung his dummy trenchcoat back in the closet, and went out to join his host and hostess. Surprisingly enough, Freistoffer sat at the table, smooth-shaven, smelling of cologne. "Sleep well?" he asked. "Evidently not. Look at those red eyes. Like a pair of tail-lights. Nightmares, Gill?"

Katie poured the coffee. "Last night sounded like adult Westerns," she said. "Get any of those Indians, Gill?"

"That was Felix outside my window," Gill said. "And breaking it too. Psychological warfare, is that the idea?"

"Nonsense!" Freistoffer said. He speared himself a slice of ham. He demolished it with excellent appetite, then, moving casually, went to the kitchen table and got himself a butcher knife from the drawer.

"Drop it, Felix!" Gill shouted, raising the gun.

Freistoffer seized the knife by its tip and hurled it. He dropped to the floor the instant Gill fired. The bullet buried itself in the spot Freistoffer's head had just shadowed. "One plus four plus one," Freistoffer drawled, getting up. "That's six, if I remember my schooling, Gill. The Astra 200-series takes six shells, if I remember my guns."

Gill tugged out the magazine from his little golden gun. The spring was at the top. He tossed the useless automatic to the floor.

"Now we're equals," Freistoffer said, picking up the gun and laying it on the table. "You've just flunked part one of the big intelligence test, Gill. The exam won't be graded till after part two. The problem is to keep yourself alive till my plane gets here. Do that, and you may pass the course."

Gill bent and snatched up the knife Freistoffer had thrown at him. "I didn't come here to kill you, Felix," he said, "but you've left me no choice." He advanced, holding the knife underhand.

"More in sorrow than in anger, eh, Gill?" Freistoffer said. He backed, his arms raised to the level of his hips. "Come on, boy—strike! You want to finish me, now's your chance." He stopped his retreat at the center of the room. "Come on, Gill," he purred. "Just do it, Junior; and you'll own my business and my Katie's facile love. Good pay for simple surgery."

Gill's face was running sweat. The tip of the knife danced with his pulse. He grasped the hilt with both hands and threw himself forward.

The older man ducked beneath the blade, caught Gill's wrists, and threw his arms up over his head. Gill's skull slammed against the floor.

Freistoffer plucked the butcher knife from his hands. He knelt beside Gill. "I'm proud of you, boy," he said. "I thought you were book-keeper clean through, with no more nerve than a mushroom. I'd like to offer you one little hint, Gill: never close your eyes when you lunge. It marks you as an amateur." Freistoffer delicately pressed the blunt edge of the blade against Gill's Adam's-apple.

"Go ahead!" Gill ordered. "Why don't you get it over with?"

Freistoffer lifted the knife. "Too easy," he said. "We've still got three hours to play." He stood, went to the door, and sent the butcher knife spinning like a silver boomerang down into the lake.

Gill was in the bathroom, being sick.

"I could see you kill a man, Felix," Katie said, "but you're mauling him like a cat with a sparrow."

Freistoffer poured himself a second cup of breakfast coffee. "I didn't do that just for kicks, Katie," he said. "I meant it as a lesson."

"If Gill's going to die," she said, "the lesson won't do him any good."

"Gill isn't my only student, Katie," Freistoffer said.

"Me?" the girl asked. "Felix, I know better than ever to cross you."

"Now you do," he explained.

Gill, pale, rejoined them. "Why didn't you finish it?" he asked.

Freistoffer laughed. "I told you, we've still got some playing-time left." He glanced at Katie. "Our little tragedienne is registering a complex emotion," he said. "I'd say it's rage, mingled with disgust. Right? Are those real tears, Katie, or just another product of Actor's Studio?"

"Damn you!" she said.

Freistoffer glanced at his watch. "Just nine-thirty," he said. "One of us has no more than a hundred and fifty minutes to live. Gives breathing a certain spice, doesn't it?"

"I've never killed a man," Gill said.

"You've made one good try that I know of," Freistoffer said.

"I can't take much more of this," Katie said. She walked over to the gun-cabinet. "Help me pull these boards off," she said.

"Why?" Gill asked.

"A duel," she said. "That's the only answer."

"Hardly a fair answer," Freistoffer said. "We'd have to fight with fountain-pens, for Gill to have a chance."

"I'll settle for guns, Felix," Gill said. He grabbed the edge of one of the bookshelves that was holding the cabinet shut and yanked it free,

the nails screeching from the hard wood. "Load two guns, Katie," he said, stepping back.

Katie opened the drawer that held the four Lugers. "How do you put bullets in these?"

"I'll show you how," Freistoffer volunteered.

"You'll stand back there and tell me," she said.

"Okay," Freistoffer said. He got a box of parabellum cartridges from the ammunition cabinet and held it out to Katie. "Push down that button just behind the trigger on the left," he said. She did this with one of the Lugers. The magazine dropped into her hand. "Now pull down on the feeder knob and drop in one cartridge. Slip the magazine back in, and pull up and back on those two knobs on top. Let the block slide forward. Now you've got one loaded Luger."

Katie loaded the four pistols and picked up two at random. "Stand back-to-back," she ordered the two men.

"A classic duel," Freistoffer said. "Gill, you'll leave in a dignified manner, the exit beloved of playboys and princes."

"Dignity," Gill told him, "is the least of my worries."

"I'll give you each a gun and step back," Katie said. She switched the Lugers around to hold them by their barrels.

"Careful, Katie," Gill said. "They're not on safety."

"Ready?" she asked.

"And eager," Freistoffer said. He reached across his chest, his hand open to receive the gun.

"Hold out your hand, Gill," Katie said. "You'll get the guns on the count of three. One . . . two . . . three!"

Freistoffer whirled and fired. Gill's gun was still swinging when he fell, shot through the head.

Freistoffer looked down at the body. "You were clever, Katie," he said, looking up at her. "By suggesting we settle our affair with guns, you made certain I'd win. You've just won a pretty important intelligence test of your own, kid."

"I haven't quite won it yet," Katie said. She took one of the two remaining Lugers from the drawer. "I wouldn't rate very high if I let you live after I've seen the sort of man you are." She fired.

After taking the unfired gun from Gill's hand, and replacing it with the one she'd used, Katie walked out to the pier to wait for the plane. As the pilot helped her aboard, she was crying. Real tears.

The Tutor

by Michael Bruen

Wallace Frazee was neither stolid nor unimaginative and it did not escape his notice that his wife, Lorna, seemed distraught lately, more often than not. He was not so stolid and unimaginative as to say nothing and await developments; he asked her directly what was eating her.

Lorna simply looked at him, either blandly or blankly, and said, "Nothing's eating me. What should be?"

As Wallace did not know what should be eating his wife, he did not pursue the line of inquiry and it seemed to him that Lorna became somewhat more relaxed after his question. She did not start so much when the phone rang, her attention wandered less when he spoke to her and she resumed, more or less, her pleasantly affectionate position as dutiful spouse. The modification of more or less was placed on her behavior by Wallace himself, realizing he must be fairly analytical since he was a considerably older husband of a youngish wife.

As the weeks passed and no unfelicitous change occurred in his marital routine, Wallace relaxed, although he still felt occasionally that Lorna was not always with him. However, since there was nothing he could put his finger on, he did not touch upon it again.

Wallace preferred the bus on short business trips because parking so often was a problem. It came as a rather brutal shock to him, therefore, when, leaving his office earlier than usual one afternoon, he saw from his seat his wife Lorna, face set, driving their automobile. A good part of the shock was attributable to the fact that Lorna could not drive an automobile; and the not inconsiderable balance of shock was caused by the other occupant of the front seat of the car, a personable young man talking earnestly to Lorna.

Wallace's bus drove directly alongside the car and there was no pos-

sibility of error. It was Lorna; it was his car; and it was a strange young man. He stared so hard that Lorna seemed to become aware of it, but as she glanced about the bus made a left turn and the incident was over if not closed.

Wallace frowned. In three years of marriage it had been impossible to teach Lorna to drive. She would freeze at the wheel, turn taut and white, and there were times he got so mad he could, figuratively, have killed her. How could any woman be that dense! Finally, they had both given it up as a bad job and accepted the fact that she was too high strung. It seemed safer for her not to drive.

The situation had irritated him for awhile as it would have been most convenient if Lorna could drive him to the station and pick him up like other wives. He accepted, however, the restrictions on the use of the car over weekends and took the bus on business days.

Wallace wondered now if Lorna had always known how to drive or if she had lately forced herself to learn. Either instance prefaced the unanswerable: Why?

He had known little of Lorna before their marriage. She had been a receptionist for one of the firms he called on periodically. They had become friendly, then more than friendly, and he had been disturbed to find himself in love with her. She had responded, reassured him over the age differential and here they were.

Where were they?

Wallace did not feel inclined to tell Lorna that he had seen her and request an explanation. At first he thought a sudden direct question might bring the truth, but the deviousness of her behavior frightened him a little. And there was the strong possibility that she would lie and the situation might grow more complex. He did ask casually that evening, however:

"Do anything interesting today, honey?"

"Well," she said, "I went into Bascomb."

"Oh?" he said, relieved.

"What do you mean 'Oh', nosey?" she replied. "Do you have to know everything?"

He was taken aback, but she was smiling.

"A girl might want to do a little shopping when her anniversary is coming up," she added. She was kittenish. "What did *you* do today?" she asked as if she really wanted to know.

Well, they did have an anniversary coming up and he did have a present for her. Quite awhile back he'd bought a diamond ring of considerable value. Recent events had put it out of his mind.

Yes, all very glib and plausible. But the driving?

During the next few days he thought the matter out carefully and made a few uncomplicated plans.

On the night before their anniversary he told Lorna that he was taking her to dinner at the country club and she seemed pleased. Beside him as he drove, she was relaxed and pleasant.

The night was dark and the road deserted. The country club was outlying and fairly quiet on Monday nights. When they were not quite there, he slammed on the brakes and slumped in his seat.

Lorna's chatter died away. "Wallace," she said, "what is it?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "It must be my heart. I'm sick."

She sat motionless, as if in shock.

"You'll have to get help," he whispered. "Flag a car. Walk to the club if you have to. I can't make it."

He waited. This was it. What would she do? Did she think he was dying? Was she thinking in triumph, This is just what I wanted?

From the corner of his eye, he watched her get out of the car.

She came around and opened the left hand door.

"Now, Wallace," she said tensely. "I'm going to slide you over, and I'll take the wheel." Gently, she helped get him over.

"One of the doctors may be at the club," she said quietly. "Just relax, be very still: I'll have you there in a few moments."

She drove speedily, expertly.

Finally he sat up. "I feel better," he said dazedly. "I don't know what was the matter with me. It's passed."

"Oh, Wallace," she said, gasping with relief. "I was so frightened. You've got to see the doctor right away."

"No," he said. "I'm all right now. I'll see one tomorrow."

She said nothing, drove intently.

When they reached the club he was his normal self. There was no doctor at the club and she gave in to his insistence that they dine, on his promise that he would see the doctor in the morning.

He found himself at a loss in his cat-and-mouse game.

"Honey," he said intently, "you did nobly, but you could have been arrested for driving without a license."

She stared at him. "Oh," she wailed, "my surprise!"

Then she smiled. "I guess it was all in a good cause. Here." She handed him a square envelope.

He took it curiously. His name was written on the outside in her curlicue writing. In the envelope there was a splashy anniversary card. Stapled to the card was a recently issued driver's license issued to Mrs. Lorna Frazee.

He just looked at her.

"I felt so useless to you," she explained. "So I went to driving school in Bascomb. This man who taught me is wonderful, so patient and calm. You know, dear, I don't think a husband should ever try to teach his wife how to drive."

Wallace agreed with that all right. There were times when he got so mad he could have—

But looking at her now there was nothing he could say. Good Lord! he thought, I've been acting like a character in a cheap novel, as though I'd expected to be murdered for my insurance. His heart swelled in gratification. How will I ever make it up to her?

He thought of all kinds of ways while Lorna went to the powder room. Get her an expensive little sports car of her own, take her on a trip, get her a bracelet to go with the ring. None of it seemed to be worthy of her and he himself was sure he would never be.

In the powder room, Lorna's phone conversation was brief:

"Ed?" she said. "I was right. He did see us that day in Bascomb. It will have to be tonight."

"Same place?"

"Yes."

The same place meant about two miles down the road where the cliff fell off a thousand feet from the side where Wallace would be sitting when Lorna swung the wheel and at the last moment jumped out.

"You'll be there to slow us down. Any pretext?"

"Just as we planned it. Blink the lights twice."

"You sound very sure."

"I am, darling. I taught you."

"Bye." She hung up, put back the smile she had used so much lately and returned to her contrite husband. She tucked the fake license Ed had prepared inside the celluloid window of her wallet to burn later. No one must know Mrs. Frazee could operate a car.

Voice in the Night

by Robert Colby

For two nights there had been thundershowers and since it never seemed to work very well when it rained, he had been moody and tense, violently caged within himself and the empty house. Perched atop a hill in the isolation of three high-walled acres, the house was an elegant straggle of stone and wood hunched down in a cloister of giant trees.

Broodingly confined to it, he lounged about in one room or another, reading and watching television (a set in every room), or occasionally took a swim in the regulated, tepid water of the glass-sheltered pool. Despite the frigid breath of central air-conditioning at work to dispel the dense humidity of late summer, during the night he lay in a damp huddle of sleeplessness. The urge had come upon him again and now it consumed even his sleep.

Monday evening came with a pure sky after a day of searing sun. Monday was a good time. People settled down after the weekend and seldom made plans for a Monday night. He fixed an early dinner of leftovers from the refrigerator, then barely touched a morsel. At six-thirty he went to the study, seated himself behind the desk and rubbed his hands together gleefully.

He placed the heavy phone book before him and opened it at random. His finger idly roved a column, paused, continued slowly: *Landrith, Landruf—Landrum!* A good, solid name, Landrum. There were Landrums, *Albert, Bruce, Dewey, Edward . . .* Ed Landrum? Fine. Just right! He printed the name boldly on a sheet of paper, closed the phone book, once more opened it carelessly.

His finger came to rest on the name Henderson. There were dozens of Hendersons, nearly three columns. When in doubt, begin at the be-

ginning. Skip *Henderson Adrian C.*, forget *Henderson Agnes B. Mrs.* How about *Henderson Alice*? Let's see if we can get a winner with *Alice*.

He wrote the number down and then dialed it.

A woman answered. She sounded eighty, going on ninety. The grandmother? "Hello there! May I speak with *Alice*, please?"

"What's that?"

This one forgot the ear trumpet! "*Alice. Alice Henderson!*"

"This here is *Alice* speakin'."

"Sorry, wrong *Alice*." He dropped the receiver. A real dud. Well, you couldn't expect to make it on the first try. He never had. Anyway, with every failure the excitement mounted. The first thrill came with the hunt. Now he dialed an *Arline Henderson*. A man growled at him and he erased the connection.

Barbara Henderson wasn't home. Lucky *Barbara*! He dialed *Beatrice*. After a while she came on like one foot out the door. She had a hard pushy voice.

"*Bea*? Is that you, *Bea*?"

"Yeah, This is *Bea*. Who's this?"

"Bet you'll never guess."

"You wanna play games; try *solitaire*!"

"Well, it's been a long time, *Bea*. I'm being cute, I just wanted to see if you still—"

"I shoulda known," she cut in. "It's *Bernie*! Right?"

He chuckled. "Okay, I confess. It's *Bernie*. I realize it's short notice, *Bea*, but I thought maybe you might—"

"Listen, *Bernie*," she said in a muted, deadly voice, "know what you are? You're a creep. I don't go out with creeps. Where you staying this time, *Bernie*? At the zoo? What's your cage number in case I change my mind?"

He snorted. "You got a great sense of humor, *Bea*. Too bad we can't get together. I had a big night planned for us." He turned her off with a thumb on the cross-bar.

The *Bea Henderson* types were poison. For this you had to snare one that was soft and pliable and not very bright. In one way or another the rest fizzled, but he stuck with the *Hendersons* until he got to *Victoria*:

"*Vicky*? Is that you, *Vicky*?"

"Yes—this is Vicky." This was a young one, late twenties or first thirties, maybe.

"It's been a long time, Vicky."

"Well, who is this?" she said, "I—I can't seem to place you."

"Can't place me? And to think that only a few years back you placed me first, Vicky."

"Heavens!" Nervous giggle. "You're putting me on the spot."

"Kinda fun though, isn't it?"

"For you, maybe. Have a heart. Who *are* you?"

Man, this one was a dilly! Made to order. "Ah, c'mon, give it a whirl. You always were a good sport, Vicky. I'll give you a clue. I'm either Bill, Joe, or Dave. Check one out of three." He didn't care. If that didn't work he'd bang the phone and spin the dial for a live one. Sooner or later . . .

"You serious? Bill, Joe, or Dave?"

"Dead serious."

"Mmm, let's see. I know a couple of Bills, but they're pretty recent." Pause. "Hey, you're not Walter Buckley, are you?"

Wow, a real brain! "Honey, you can't find a Walter in Bill, Joe, or Dave."

"Of course not!" Peevishly. "He just came into my mind, that's all."

"Well, I'll admit you're getting close. Say, whatever happened to Walt?"

"Walter? Last I heard he was working for some law firm and going around with that tacky Jane Vogel."

"You're kidding! Jane Vogel, huh? I never could stand her type."

"You and me, ditto. I hope they got married, they deserve each other. Are you married?"

"Would I be calling?"

"Mm. Were you *ever* married?"

"Was. Got a divorce."

"Well, join the club!" Long pause. "I don't know any Joes and I only know one—Ahh, *now* I've got you. You're Dave Mosby!"

"At last! And for shame. How could you forget?"

"Dave! Is it really you, Dave?"

"Yours truly, Dave Mosby."

"After all this time!"

"Lotta water, Vicky."

"How long is it—five years?"

"More like six, I'd say."

"You and Betty got divorced?"

"Yeah, can you beat it? Well, that's the way it goes."

"Did you know that I had divorced Clint?"

"Heard a rumor. That's why I called."

"How sweet!"

Careful with this one, baby; it's loaded. "So what happened after you said bye-bye to Clint? Move in with a girlfriend?"

"Nope. Rented my own little apartment and went back to work. That's how much Clint is doing for me. You still selling insurance for—what's the name of that outfit?"

Think fast! "Got my own agency now, Vicky. I'm part of it, anyway. Big agency." He pulled the sheet of paper toward him. "This friend of mine, Ed Landrum, a guy with trunkloads of dough, took me in with him."

"Marvelous."

"Want you to meet Ed. His wife and kids too."

"That would be nice."

"I'm staying with Ed. He has this big house, really a showplace."

"My! What part of town would that be, Dave?" she questioned.

When they asked, he couldn't avoid the truth. They rarely asked and anyway, especially when they lived alone, it didn't matter. "Crestview Gardens," he said.

"Really? Oh, that's the living end. I'll bet you couldn't get a house there for under seventy-five thousand."

"A hundred and up; mostly up."

"And you're staying there in Swankville?"

"Just for the time being. Recovering from an accident."

"Oh, dear!"

"Cost me a fractured leg—in three places."

"How terrible for you."

"Not really. It's healing great, but I can't get out for a while longer. Pretty dull. Lonely too. Will you come visit me, Vicky? Meet the Landrums, see how the other half lives?"

"I'd love to!"

"Come tonight, then. Ed's still down at the office with some paper work and I could ask him to pick you up."

"Tonight? Well, I don't know. Working gals have to get their beauty sleep."

"Just for an hour or two. Whatta you say, Vicky? Old time's sake?"

"Honestly, Dave, what a rush job! I feel as if I don't quite know you any more. You seem different somehow. More mature . . . older."

"We don't get any younger, Vicky."

"How old *are* you now? Let's see, you were—"

"I stopped counting. How old *are you* now, Vicky?"

"Just add five or six years."

"Oh, you are a coy one. Well, let me ring Ed, see if he can drive you up here. Get right back to you, okay?"

"You don't think he'll mind?"

"Ed? My best friend! Just give me a minute to arrange something."

He rang off and then waited three minutes. "Ed says it's a deal," he reported. "But would you mind meeting him in the lobby of the Winston Plaza? It's close by the office. He'll send a cab to your apartment at eight sharp."

"Well—"

"Sit near the desk in the lobby."

"How will he recognize me?"

"I painted a nice picture for him, but better tell me what you'll be wearing so I can pass it on to him."

"Nothing fancy?"

"As you are, Vicky."

"I'll be wearing a green silk dress with a gold chain belt."

"Cab'll fetch you at eight, then. And listen, I can't wait to see you again, Vicky!"

The instant he put down the phone he began to snicker.

At five minutes to eight he was waiting in an obscure corner, where there was a view of the entrance and the desk. It was a crazy gamble. Sometimes he caught a real dog, in which case, being as yet uncommitted, he could leave the dope squirming on the hook and spin the dial another night.

He never went in person to pick them up, never used the same meeting place twice, and always sent the cab by phone. Still, there was an element of risk which gave him an exquisite sense of excitement.

Vicky Henderson, in the green dress with the gold chain belt, ar-

rived at ten past eight. She stood near the desk a moment but after a quick glance about sat down primly and then began a fussy examination of her makeup, head cocked as she viewed herself in the mirror of her compact.

Her voice hadn't lied about her age. She was looking back on her twenties from no great distance, but in all other aspects she failed to match his vague conception. He had imagined her to be tall and blonde, while she was short and dark-haired. She had tiny features. A receding chin gave her face a look of incompleteness. Her eyes were wide and solemn, with long, fake lashes. She had a cute little mouth, however, and for one so petite, an astonishingly good figure.

He was pleased. She was better than most. She would do very well.

He went right up to her then, stood peering down at her with his odd little smile as she let the compact fall back into her purse and looked up.

"Hello there," he said. "You must be Vicky, and I'm Ed Landrum."

Though she quickly recovered and offered him a flickering smile, she had been startled. They always were because, while one side of his face was quite handsome, the other somehow just missed the boat as a perfect match. It was almost as if he were two people in one face. Few things gave him such a kick as to let it come as a shock, watching them coil inside, as if ready to run. Perhaps they would, too, if not for his polite manner, the expensively tailored suit, and the Dave Mosbys waiting.

"I'm so happy to meet you, Ed," Vicky cooed, overdoing it to reimburse for her initial reaction. Standing, she bravely delivered her hand to his own. "So nice of you to go to so much trouble."

"Not at all. Anything for old Dave. He's my closest friend. Shall we go?"

With a gentle pressure against her elbow, he guided her rapidly from the lobby and into the street, now becoming dusky as the last light seeped from the sky. She was so short she had to doubletime to keep up with him.

The car was a gleaming, pearl-gray Bentley. While she drooled over it, he started the motor, closed the windows and adjusted the air-conditioning. They slid away.

"It's such a hot night," she said in a minute. "How good to ride in such a lovely, cool automobile."

He smiled from one side of his face, accelerated and needled swiftly through the traffic. She kept yanking nervously at her skirt and poking at her hair.

"Have you known Dave long?"

"It seems like I've known him all my life. Actually, it's been only a couple of years." Tell them anything. The idiots are dying to believe.

"You met Betty, of course."

"Yes. Oh, yes! Too bad. I was fond of Betty. So was Joyce."

"Joyce?"

"My wife. You'll meet her presently."

"Dave said you have children."

"Bobby, he's seven, and Gloria, she's nine."

"Seven and nine," she mused. "Kids are cute at that age."

"Delightful." He offered her a cigarette but she refused with a shake of her head. He plunged the dashboard lighter.

"I lost complete track of Dave. Did he and Betty have kids?"

"No."

"I'm glad."

"Are you?" He turned onto the parkway and settled comfortably in his seat. He had it made.

"Well, I mean, if two people don't get along, it's always lucky when they don't have kids."

"How true," he said, and brushed a cigarette ash from his trousers.

"I never thought of that." He almost laughed.

She leaned against the door and studied him, with her chin cupped in her palm. "You seem like such a nice person, Ed."

"Think so?"

"Mind if I ask how—how it happened?"

"How what happened?"

"You know, your face."

"Most people don't mention it."

"Oh, now, did I offend you?"

"No, I like girls with enough guts to come right out with it."

"Tell me, then."

"Viet Nam. I was a captain, infantry. A shell fragment blasted a chunk out of my head and pulverized one side of my face."

"Did they use plastic surgery to—"

"Sure, but they didn't have much left to work with. Since then I

haven't been very popular." He laughed bitterly. "Especially with the girls—until I met Joyce."

"Oh, now, I don't really think it's so bad as all—"

"Don't hand me that, you hear! I hate liars and phonies! Why don't you just say I look like a damn freak or keep your silly mouth shut!"

She gasped. "Well—I—I didn't mean—I was just trying to be—"

"That's it, you were just trying to be—but you didn't make it, did you?" He stared at her briefly. The skin under one eye dropped, giving it a look of baleful malevolence.

"Maybe you'd better take me back home, Ed. Just tell Dave some other time. Okay?"

He didn't answer; not until he swerved from the parkway and began to climb into the hills of Crestview Gardens.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I come unglued now and then but it doesn't mean anything. Nothing personal. You understand?"

"Of course," she replied stiffly. Then, warming after a moment, "It's not your fault, it's mine. I'm just plain dumb, that's all."

"Yeah, sure." You're dumb all right, baby, he told her in his mind.

They wound up and up and came to a high, redwood gate. There was a gadget on a post. He stuck a square of plastic into its mouth and the gate swung open, closing behind them:

"How clever," she said.

From here the ground rose gently in a vast carpet of lawn and shrubs and ancient, towering trees, all shrouded in darkness. Out of this darkness, at the crest of the slope, loomed the long silhouette of the house. Its dim, curtained lights winking distantly through the trees, it had somewhat the appearance of a ship in the night.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Vicky. "What a fantastic place! So beautiful and yet so—I can't find the right word—lonely, I guess. It's like when you pass through that gate, you enter another world."

He was listening to the cry of his thoughts and heard her distantly, as if from a faraway station, badly tuned. He hurled the big car up the drive, brought it around in front of the house and pulled up sharply, dousing the lights and killing the motor.

"C'mon," he said, "Dave'll be waiting." Moving ahead of her, he eyed the big door and stood poised on the threshold until she had passed inside. Then he closed the door.

The splendid, cavernous living room, bleakly lighted, was cool as a

deep cellar. Heavy drapes had been pulled across sealed windows. A silence like some guarded secret clung to the place.

He listened. "They must be down in the playroom with the kids," he said. "Watching TV, I expect. Let's go and see."

Vicky smiled unevenly, then followed him toward the rear of the house, through an enormous kitchen to a door which stood open. Light sprang from below, casting a pale radiance over wide, carpeted stairs which curved down to a cheerfully paneled basement.

"How very pleasant," she said as they descended. "It's not at all like those damp, gloomy cellars you find in most houses."

"Joyce won't allow the kids to romp and scream all over the house," he explained, "so I had this soundproof playroom constructed and stocked it with the sort of sturdy junk that can't be soiled or damaged very much."

"How does Dave manage these stairs with a broken leg?" she asked, glancing back over her shoulder.

"He doesn't. There's a lift, an elevator; runs top to bottom."

"How lucky for him."

"But I thought you could handle one little flight." (See? I have all the answers, lover.) Chuckling, he moved off down the corridor, pausing at a door, which he opened casually. Light fell from the room and the strident sound of a television was sending voices above a moody underline of background music.

He stood aside and she stepped in. The door closed behind them with a click.

Gay tiles covered the floor. The walls and ceiling were ornamented with juvenile designs in gaudy colors. The empty, windowless room contained a daybed with a corduroy cover, two leather chairs and a couple of standing lamps. The portable television, in full swing, eyed the room from a corner shelf.

As she glanced about, Vicky's mouth parted slightly and in her saucer eyes with the long, fakey lashes, there was the first shadow of fear.

"Why, there's no one here," she declared. "Where is everybody? Where's Dave?" She turned. "Ed? Why don't you answer me? Is this some sort of— Listen, what is this?"

He leaned back against the door and smiled his odd little smile in which only half of his face seemed to take part, and Vicky screamed.

Shortly after seven the next evening, Detectives Linwood and Mallick were seated in the apartment of Miss Rena Whalen, who lived on the floor above Vicky Henderson.

"Now," said Linwood, "let's take it right from the beginning, Miss Whalen. How long have you known Vicky Henderson?"

"Going on three years," said Rena Whalen, a heavyset blonde with a round, fleshy face and pouty lips. "We work in the same office and I found Vicky an apartment here after she got her divorce."

"And you drove her to work every morning and brought her back every evening, right?" inquired Mallick, who was taking notes.

"Yes, that's right. She doesn't have a car and we split the gas, the expense, that is. This morning I went down at the usual time and banged her door, but she didn't answer. So then I went back up and called her on the phone. I figured, you know, maybe she was in the shower or something. But I couldn't reach her on the phone either; and I went on to the office."

"I kept calling her all day long and then late this afternoon I got the manager to open up and see if she was sick or something. Everything was nice and neat, but no Vicky. Her bed hadn't even been slept in."

"Is it unusual for her to be away all night?" Linwood asked.

"Very unusual. I mean, it just never happened before in the time I've known her. She's not at all that sort of girl. Decent and reliable, you know."

"But," said Mallick, "you knew she had gone out with this; uh, Dave—"

"Mosby," Rena supplied. "She wasn't exactly going out with him, she was just visiting him. He couldn't leave the house because he had a broken leg from an accident. Vicky said he was staying with some rich friend, in Crestview Gardens."

"And how did Vicky happen to tell you this?" asked Linwood.

"Well, I dropped in on her about—oh, sometime before eight, it was—and she told me. She was all excited. This Dave was an old flame and he just phoned right out of the blue. She hadn't heard from him in five, six years."

Linwood said, "And what was the name of the man this Mosby was supposed to be staying with?"

"Landrum. Ed Landrum. I didn't remember the name but Vicky had written it across the top of a magazine by the phone. So I looked it up in

the book and sure enough there's an Ed Landrum and I call him and I ask him, so where's Vicky? 'What Vicky?' he says, real dumb, you know. He never even heard of Vicky Henderson. What's more he doesn't live in any Crestview Gardens; he lives out southside in Dumpville."

The two detectives exchanged glances and Mallick said, "Well, we'll go over and have a little talk with Mr. Ed Landrum. And meanwhile, I'll have them check on this Dave Mosby." He stood. "We'll get back to you in the morning, Miss Whalen."

Rena nodded. "So whatta you think, officer?"

"I think," said Mallick, "that it's very much like a case we had last summer; and who knows how many others, where there wasn't someone like you around to furnish a clue."

Rena moistened her puffy lips. "So what happened in that other case?"

"In a nut," said Mallick, "the girl made a date with some guy on the phone. She went out to meet him and never came back."

He was in the study, furiously dialing. As a rule he would let a week or two pass, but it was to be the last night and so far he had called dozens without success, skipping all over the book at random. Presently, he was dialing a Mildred Perry. She came on with a rich, eager voice.

"Millie? Is that you, Millie?"

"It certainly is!"

"Guess who? Millie, after all this time you'll never believe it . . ."

Shortly before nine the two detectives were down at headquarters discussing the case. "This is a beaut," said Mallick, who had just completed a call to Chicago. "A stone-wall deadend, just like the one last summer. Mosby can't be lying, he and the wife have been in Chicago a year and a half. Landrum and the missus had guests to the house last night for bridge, they tell us. And you can bet your bottom buck the guests will clear him. So where does that leave us?"

"Somewhere in Crestview Gardens," said Linwood.

"Ahh, c'mon now, Harry. The kinda people who live up in Crestview Gardens don't play deadly phone games with lonely women. That was just part of the gag, a little sugar on the bait. He pulled that

one right outa his hat."

"Well, maybe," said Linwood, "although money doesn't buy sanity if you're a kook. Still, I don't dig that Crestview bit myself. No sense at all. This guy is a weirdo, probably operates from a booth."

"If he kept at it all year 'round," said Mallick, "we might have a chance to grab him. But evidently he hangs it up until summer. Does that tell us anything?"

"Sure," said Linwood. "In winter he goes south with the rest of the cuckoo birds."

While the detectives argued the question, the subject of their conversation stood with Mildred Perry at the edge of that hushed living room in Crestview Gardens.

"Quiet as a tomb," he said. "Guess they went down to the playroom with the kids. Well, then, Millie, let's go have a look . . ."

Just after dawn he tidied up the house, then went down to the playroom. After he mopped the linoleum floor and wiped every surface clean, he made a thorough search, inspecting corners, peering around and under the skimpy furniture. A good thing, too, because beneath the daybed he found Vicky Henderson's gold compact. It had broken open and there was a smear of powder on the floor. He erased it with a damp cloth and put the compact into his pocket.

He went outside and began to hike over the sloping expanse of lawn, which had recently been manicured by a team of gardeners under his supervision. Far to the rear of the house he came in time to a dense stand of trees, an unspoiled woodland, left for its scenic value. He entered these woods, crossed a rustic bridge over a stream and walked on until he came to a spot so thickly populated with tangles of tall trees that, even under a summer sun, it was a place of twilight and shadow.

He began to hunt about the area until he spied a rock to guide him. Some twenty paces beyond the rock he paused and, after a squinting scrutiny of the ground, kicked aside some leaves and brought a trowel from his pocket. With a perverse sense of order, he buried the compact in the precise location.

Restoring the leaves, he straightened and dropped the trowel into his pocket. "There you go, Vicky," he murmured, "just in case your little nose gets shiny."

As he returned from the woods, the sun had taken a firm hold on the rim of the sky. Moving in another direction, he came at last to the tiny caretaker's cottage close by the gate. In the cottage he shaved the left half of his face, took a leisurely shower and fixed his breakfast. Soon, after a glance at his watch, he donned an immaculate gray uniform, adjusted the visored cap in the mirror, offered himself a twisted half-smile of disapproval, and went out.

He strolled up the hill to the four-car garage and rolled out the long, deep-blue limousine. Part-time caretaker and full-time chauffeur; well, it was a job, and in the summer, when the "family," complete with its entourage of servants, embarked for Europe and the house on the French Riviera, there were certain fringe benefits. Now the summer was gone, in a couple of hours they would return, and the routine would begin again.

Down at the gate he braked and gazed back toward the woods. For a space, welling up like bitter champagne, there was in him a curious, bubbling triumph; but as he drove away, a voice in some long disconnected part of him began a scream in his head.

I hope they catch me, cried the voice. *Oh, God, I hope they catch me!*



The Artist

by Al Nussbaum

There's something about me and cameras that is almost a miracle. My parents gave me an inexpensive reflex camera when I graduated from high school, and from that day to this, a period of thirty years, I never took a poor picture.

I didn't come from wealthy people and photography can be an expensive hobby, so in an effort to earn money for film and cameras, I always kept a camera handy and took pictures of everything that might have news or human interest value. Long before hippies began wearing beads, I often wore a necklace of two or three cameras and roamed the area from Booklyn to the Bronx, searching for new subjects. Even when the newspapers didn't care to publish any of my pictures, I was always complimented on their quality.

I might have remained just another semiprofessional if I hadn't been on the scene when a hospital fire broke out in 1939. At least three fire companies were at the blaze and the firemen had criss-crossed the street with hose. The police were too busy trying to control a crowd hypnotized by leaping flames to check for press credentials. My cameras and gadget bag got me past the police lines and into the small circle of newspapermen and other photographers.

It was apparent the building was going to be a total loss. Sparks, smoke and flame belched from almost every window, and the firemen were pouring huge streams of water into it without noticeable effect. I took a few shots, then turned up the collar of my jacket to shield my face from the heat.

Just then a girl about my own age climbed onto the ledge outside a sixth-floor window. She wore the pale-blue uniform of a student nurse and stood with her arms braced against the sides of the window open-

ing. As she looked fearfully down, the bright flames shone through her dress, silhouetting her slender figure.

Firemen who had been watching the fire with resignation now leaped to action. Two sped to the hook and ladder truck to get the circular rescue net—there wasn't time to raise the ladder. Others ran to position themselves under the girl so they'd be ready to hold the net for her as soon as it arrived. The photographers began feeding fresh film into their cameras and checking exposure settings. They expected her to delay her leap until the net was in place, but she didn't.

I was the only one prepared and I got two pictures. The first was taken a split second after her body arced into space; the second captured the moment of impact. The pictures sold quickly and were picked up by one of the wire services. They earned me three news photography awards and a full-time job with a national magazine.

I soon learned, however, that success isn't an unmixed blessing.

It all began to take shape with the execution of Mike Dwyer, a longshoreman who had killed his wife one hot August afternoon. The magazine I worked for was planning a series of articles, advocating an end to capital punishment. I was assigned to cover the execution. Cameras weren't allowed, of course, but I wasn't supposed to let that stop me. My expense account absorbed the cost of two miniature cameras—one disguised as a tie clasp, the other as a wristwatch. My job was to record the horror of the spectators during the execution.

I didn't follow orders. Inexperienced as a professional, I acted on impulse. Instead of concentrating on the spectators' reactions, I focused on Mike Dwyer's. I caught his tear-filled eyes and trembling lips as the black hood was lowered over his head; I captured the contortions caused by the three monstrous jolts of electricity he suffered before being pronounced dead; and I showed the fine spirals of smoke that rose from the points where the electrodes had touched him. I was sure these would be a more powerful statement against capital punishment than something as secondhand as audience reaction.

Unfortunately, my boss didn't share my satisfaction. I had produced stark realism years before the public had been conditioned to accept it. When he saw the prints, he went into a rage. "This is a family magazine. We can't publish anything like *this*!" he yelled, slamming the pictures onto his desk. "Just what was going through your head?"

He didn't fire me, but he came close to doing it, and before long I

almost wished he had. The people I worked with asked themselves the same question he had asked me, but they supplied an answer too: they decided I was some kind of freak who enjoyed horror. Like some people who think they can figure out a man's character from the type of books he reads, they decided that the pictures I took were an indication of the kind of person I was deep inside.

Sure, it was crazy, but that's the situation I was up against. I tried to tell them I wasn't unfeeling. If anything, I was quite the opposite. I explained that I took the kind of pictures I did because I believed the only pictures worth taking were ones that could be printed without a caption, or at most a short one. To take this kind of picture, I had to be completely objective. I had to be able to disassociate myself from my subject, whatever it might be. They listened, but remained unconvinced. They continued to think I was lacking in some human quality.

Circumstances didn't help. I was continually being assigned to cover minor disasters. The one time I drew a routine assignment, covering a parade, the reviewing stand collapsed and I found myself photographing the dead and injured pinned beneath the wreckage. The pictures won an award, but my personal popularity reached zero. Now, not only was I mixed up inside, I was followed by a black cloud as well. It was depressing.

I'm not especially tall, or handsome, or well-built. I had polio as a child and it left me with a slight limp. Despite these imperfections, I had never had difficulty getting dates with girls—until my success as a photographer. Girls still went out with me, but seldom more than once. When they learned what I did for a living, they wanted to see some of my pictures. After that, they always had “previous” engagements when I called. They were well aware that I wasn't the only photographer who was sometimes forced to work with unpleasant subjects, but they were quick to say that my pictures were “different.”

World War II came at a time when my spirits were at their lowest, but the military didn't want a man with a limp, regardless of how able he was. I became a war correspondent and was soon too busy for romance. I covered the war in Europe for a news service and my professional reputation grew. When Israel fought the Arabs in 1948, I was there with my cameras; and when war broke out in Korea a couple of years later, I was one of the first civilians in the front lines.

During those years I didn't take as many pictures as some other

photographers did; but if you try to recall a few of the photos that appeared in newspapers and magazines, it's almost certain the ones you think of will all be mine. Invariably, my pictures burn themselves into people's memories.

After Korea I returned to New York and a well-paying job at a news magazine. As always, everyone soon began to treat me like a leper; however, I tried not to let the coldness of my co-workers bother me. The time didn't pass swiftly, but it passed—and then I met Judith.

There was a cafeteria in the same building that housed the magazine offices. One morning a woman slid onto the seat across from me and set her tray down. I looked up and glanced around the room. There were plenty of vacant seats. I turned back and found her regarding me with large brown eyes. There was the barest trace of a nervous smile on her lips. "Do you mind if I sit with you?" she asked.

I shrugged and shook my head. I was pushing forty then and feeling lonely, and I recognized her as one of the editorial assistants from the magazine. She was thin and frail-appearing, but not unattractive, and she wore her dark hair at shoulder length like a schoolgirl. I guessed her age as thirty-one; it turned out she was thirty-four. Her left hand had no rings. I returned her smile, and the stiffness left the set of her shoulders.

Looking back, even if I had known how short a life we would have together, I don't think I would have done anything differently. I needed someone, if only to talk to for a few minutes, and I think she did too.

"Everyone in the office is a little afraid of you," she announced solemnly.

How do you tell someone without sounding ridiculous that no one understands you? I can't recall what I said, but I must have managed it without looking like a fool. Judith Keller—that was her full name—gave me sympathy and understanding. Here, for the first time, was someone who had seen my work and could still look me in the eye without thinking a monster stared back. She shuddered when she spoke about some of the pictures I had taken, but she didn't hold it against me that I did my job well.

"You're not just a photographer," she said. "You're an artist. It's wrong to try to judge an artist the same way you would other people."

I needed Judith and she needed me, and I was happy that my pic-

tures didn't come between us. We had lunch together every day, and went to dinner and shows as well. Once when we danced and she felt the hard bulge of the small camera I always carried, she understood immediately. "A policeman carries a pistol when he's off-duty because he never really is," she said. "Why shouldn't it be the same for a photographer?"

Six weeks after we first spoke, we were married and moved into an apartment in Brooklyn. Judith insisted on working at first, but a few months later, when the doctor confirmed the fact that we would be having an addition to the family, I made her quit. She stayed home, making baby clothes and preparing the baby's room.

From the sixth month on she suffered from minor spells of dizziness. The doctor gave her some green pills and prescribed plenty of rest. That's why I wasn't too happy when, during her eighth month of pregnancy, she decided we should spend an evening out.

"It seems like ages since we went anywhere," she said. "And after the baby's here, it'll be a long time before we can go out again. Please, honey. Let's go somewhere Saturday."

What could I do? I saw a ticket scalper the next day and bought a pair of orchestra seats for a popular musical. I could have bought a fine camera for what they cost me, but I figured they were worth it. I wanted everything to be perfect.

That was ten years ago, but I remember everything clearly. The subway entrance was only a block from our apartment, so we decided to take the train into Manhattan as we had done when we were newly married. Judith said it would be romantic and the exercise would be good for her. It was a warm summer evening, and we walked hand in hand like a couple of teenagers out on a date. Passersby, noticing Judith's condition, smiled at us and we smiled back. At the steps to the subway I showed her the tickets I'd bought, and she hugged my arm with affection.

"Those tickets must have cost a fortune," she accused mildly. "You're so extravagant, I'll bet you'd use color film to photograph a zebra."

I squeezed her hand, and we went down the steps and past the turnstiles. The platform was surprisingly empty. Judith used the unexpected privacy to stand on tiptoe and kiss my cheek. "You're the best husband a woman could ever want," she said.

"Thank you, Ma'am," I answered.

"You know what I'd like?" she said, pointing to a nearby vending machine. "Some salted peanuts."

I was glad she didn't have a craving for pickles and ice cream. "Your wish is my command," I told her, and walked to the machine.

When I turned with the package of peanuts in my hand, I saw Judith painfully trying to climb from the tracks to the platform. During the moments my back had been turned, she had either stumbled or had one of her dizzy spells and fallen to the tracks. Now, with the sound of the approaching train loud in our ears, she didn't have the strength to pull herself back onto the platform. Her hands were trembling as she reached frantically toward me for help.

I'll never forget the expression on her face the instant the train struck her. Her eyes were round with mingled shock, surprise and horror, and her lips were parted to release a scream no one ever heard. The picture I took is one of my best. It's in color.



Undertaker, Please Drive Slow

by Ron Goulart

He kept telling me she wasn't dead. I listened, nodding, smoking a menthol cigarette, watching the autumn wind shuffle the dead leaves in the big flagstone back yard outside his den windows.

George Oland's breathing had been getting more raspy as he talked and he stopped now and pointed a big freckled hand at my cigarette. "Maybe you ought to put it out."

Twisting the butt in a seashell ashtray I aimed an elbow at the window with the sliced screen. "Why should your daughter want to burgle the house?" I probed.

"I don't know if she did, Mr. Lowe. I don't know what the poor kid is up to." He rested his palms on the coffee table in front of him, then picked up the letters again. "It's been two and a half years—two years, seven months—but I always knew she hadn't drowned. I knew she'd come back."

Two years and seven months ago, according to the clippings he'd shown me, Nancy Oland had jumped over the side of a yacht at a spot down the coast from San Pedro. She'd left no note. Her body had never been found. Apparently she had jumped sometime before dawn and no one had missed her for several hours. The police decided none of the other people on the yacht were involved.

Then, five days before he'd called me, Nancy's father had received a letter from her, telling him to register at a motel out near Palm Springs the next day and wait for her. Oland, who'd never once left his house since his daughter disappeared, took a bus out to the desert. He waited two and a half days and the girl never showed. The motel people had never heard of her. Reluctantly he came back home to Glendale, where he found his house had been broken into and that

someone had gone through Nancy's old room, a room he kept just as she'd left it.

I'd told Oland the obvious. Someone wanted him out of his house and had used the one sure lure. He said no, he knew Nancy was alive somewhere; alive, confused and needing help. He wouldn't go to the police about the break-in, but called in a private detective agency.

He handed me the new letter, mailed in Glendale, the one that had pulled him out into the desert, and one of the letters his daughter had written him the semester she was away at UC in Berkeley. "You can see it's the same writing," he told me again.

I held the two letters, not looking at them. The writing had seemed similar the first time he'd shown me, but I wasn't a handwriting specialist. Usually I worked on skip tracing, divorce stuff, bugging and debugging, but every once in a while, and a lot of times it was in the fall when the Santa Ana wind was blowing and the canyons above Los Angeles were burning, a client would show up with an odd one—like Oland's daughter who had come back to life. "Let me take these to a handwriting man," I said.

"No," he said, grabbing both letters. "It's the first word I've had." He fingered the new letter. "She's a sensitive kid. She's afraid, after all the fuss made when she went away. I know she wants to see me."

"Jumping into the Pacific Ocean isn't like taking a two-week vacation." It was a bright, harsh afternoon but in here there was a twilight feeling.

Oland was big, heavy, had thick white hair and a sheriff's moustache. He straightened up in his wicker chair. "I don't know if I care for your flippancy, Lowe."

I cocked my head. "Okay. For fifty bucks a day you can find a lot of guys who'll humor you." I stretched out of my chair.

"I don't want to be humored," he said, rising and blocking me. "I know your agency. They did work for my company when I was still active. I want you to handle this. It's just that I don't want you to mock me, Lowe. I know Nancy's alive. Please find her."

"What was taken from here?" I asked him.

His big head shook. "Nothing. Nothing I can tell."

He'd shown me the room upstairs, a pink and white young college girl's room. It was obvious someone had carefully searched it. There was a subtle disorder. "Now," I said, moving a few steps back, "you

know what I feel. We're not going to find her."

"We have to look," Oland said, and sank back into his chair. "Somehow we have to look." He covered half his face with his spread fingers, began crying.

I turned, went to his desk and picked up the photos of Nancy Oland he'd shown me. She had been a tall girl, nearly five-ten. Pretty in a strong, outdoors way, a brunette, she was twenty-three when she disappeared. "I'll take one or two of these," I told him.

"Don't take the one of her in the navy blue suit. It's the only copy I have."

It didn't make any difference which ones I took, since I didn't think the girl was alive. "How about friends of your daughter's? People she might have been in touch with."

Oland took out a handkerchief, wiped his eyes. "Nancy was a quiet girl. There was no regular man friend in her life. I can give you names and addresses of a few of her close friends. The last year before she went away she lived in Hollywood with a girl named Beth Eisner. Then there's Carrie Milligan, she's been a friend since high school." He told me how to find them and a few others.

The wind scattered brown and yellow leaves against the glass. "I'll ask some questions. Probably drive out to Palm Springs and talk to the motel people." A gray cat, fat and dusty, had come into the room and was watching us from under the heavy desk.

"She's going to be coming back," Oland said to the cat. Up again, he led me into the hall. He held out his hand and I shook it. I couldn't think of anything more to say to him.

Oland's big brown shingle house was on a wide street, tree lined. Most of it looked like Southern California in the Thirties, pleasant with a porched, Midwest feeling. The present, though, was infiltrating. Nearby were a liquor store, a coin laundry, and, directly across, a pizza place—the World Pizzeria, featuring Pizza of All Nations.

I went over and wandered in. It was two-thirty in the afternoon so I was ahead of the school letout crowd. The tables were empty. An old woman in slacks, with blue-tinted hair, was resting against the counter eating the house specialty, a pizza dog. Behind the counter a small man in a buff jumpsuit was talking on a wall phone.

I rested my left elbow on the formica and waited. The man made a just-a-minute gesture at me, spoke into the phone, his head bobbing.

He hung up and hurried over. "I always call my mother this time of day. She's past seventy and I share a two-room apartment with her in Pasadena. She broke her hip last April and her life is pretty circumscribed."

I added the information to my store of countermen's autobiographies and said, "Coffee."

The old woman down-counter said, "More people should call their mothers."

When my coffee came I asked the guy, "You here most days?"

"Except Sunday," he answered. "Sundays I push Mother around Forest Lawn. She likes the pageantry."

"More boys should push their mothers' wheelchairs," the blue-haired woman said. "Another hot dog, Don."

I got Don back in front of me in a few minutes. "From here you can get a fair view of the brown shingle house across the street. Right?"

He admitted it. "A retired gentleman lives there, as I understand. Never leaves the indoors, though he did last—let me see—last Tuesday."

"Notice anyone prowling around over there?"

"No." He put his tomato-stained thumb against his small nose. "But last Wednesday, and then again this past Monday and Tuesday, there was a girl in here—dark-haired girl, tall, very attractive. I often say to my mother it's darned hard to get to know girls in this town. Attractive ones do come in here, and certainly I kid around with them. I mean, I have a fair sense of humor, but it never seems to lead to anything."

"If I had a daughter," said the hot dog woman, "I'd drag her in here and introduce her to you, Don. You're a gentleman."

"What about this brunette?" I put in.

"She asked me if I knew the fellow who lived there. Asked me if I ever saw him leave his home. I had to tell her the story in the neighborhood is he never goes out at all, due to a personal tragedy. Usually I don't incline toward gossip. I always hope if I'm nice to a girl it will lead to something."

"This girl came in more than once then?"

"Wednesday. Then again Monday and Tuesday, as I said. Sat there at table three, right near the window. Usually spent nearly a couple of hours. I was flattered and assumed she might be dropping in to chat. After the first encounter, however, she rarely spoke. Very attractive

girl, sports car lover."

"What?"

"She likes sports cars. Drives a little red one. I saw her park it out in front."

I drew out one of the studio portraits of Nancy Oland. "Know this girl?"

Don took a pair of rimless glasses from the breast pocket of his World Pizza uniform. After moving the photo as though it were a stereoscope slide, he said, "No. She's not the one. Are you a police officer?"

"Nope," I said.

"What about all this police brutality we hear about?" asked the old woman.

I smiled at her. "Not a word of truth to it."

"The girl in here was smaller than that," said Don. "I have a little hunch she'll come in again. My mother tells me any girl who likes pizza wouldn't make a good wife. I don't agree."

"My uncle married a woman who lived for three years on nothing but pizza," I said, taking the picture back.

Outside, the afternoon street was filling up with transistor-eared high school kids. I looked at the bell-bottomed girls and felt obsolete. You do sometimes at thirty-six.

Carrie Milligan wasn't home at the Beau Geste Apartments in Hollywood. The manager of the building was doing handstands beside the pool, a thick bronze guy about my age. He told me Carrie worked the cocktail hour shift at the Great Depression, a bar down on Santa Monica Boulevard. Two airline stewardesses came home from a flight while I was talking to him. They waved and called, "Hi, Sonny," walking along the catwalk stairs to their apartment. Sonny's portable phonograph changed records and a lot of Tijuana brass came out. A blonde in a scarlet bikini ran out of a ground-floor apartment and did a fair jackknife into the pool. "We're like those coffee shops down the street," Sonny said. "Open twenty-four hours. One continual round of fun and games. The basic rent is only \$150 a month and no lease required."

I told him I was studying for the ministry and liked quiet nights. I drove my secondhand car to the Great Depression and bumped up into

the customer lot. The hot wind was carrying the smell of the burning hills. Walking toward the back entrance to the low black building, I noticed a dusty red sports car parked next to the garbage cans. The registration was taped to the windshield. The car was Carrie Milligan's, an interesting coincidence.

The Great Depression was chill and dark. All the walls were covered with a collage of trivia: candy wrappers, comic-book pages, stills from Bogart movies, newspaper photos of FDR, Thomas Hart Benton prints, Rockwell covers, Krazy Kat, Amelia Earhart.

The two waitresses weren't from the Thirties. They were Carnaby style, striped pants, boots, caps. One, a brunette with wide-set smoky eyes, was leaning, hands locked behind her, against a post.

I sat at the black bar and ordered an Olympia. When the bartender brought it I asked, "Carrie Milligan works here, I believe?"

He had a fluffy moustache and he touched both ends of it before he answered. "Yes, that's so. Why, pal?"

From my coat I took a card an insurance man had left under my apartment door the week before. "I'm Ralph E. Minton, with Los Angeles Provident. We're trying to locate a missing beneficiary. I wonder if I might speak with Miss Milligan."

He felt his moustache again, seemed to want to find a resemblance between me and the typeface on the card. "That's her holding up the pillar. Tell her Rick said you could talk a few minutes in one of the empty booths. She going to get some money?"

"It's difficult to say at this stage. There is surely cause for anticipation."

Only the dark girl's eyes moved when I spoke to her. "My name is Lowe," I said. "Nancy Oland's father says you were a friend of hers. I'd like to talk to you."

Her long hands moved and came to rest on her legs. "Check with Rick."

"I got his permission."

She detached herself from the post and walked to an empty rear booth. "What does Mr. Oland want?" she asked when she was seated.

"He got a letter from somebody claiming to be Nancy," I said, across from her. "Know anything about it?"

"Nancy's dead," she said. Her voice was soft, far off. "She killed herself. Mr. Oland won't believe that." Swinging her long legs up onto

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her bench, she cupped her hands on her knees. "You know that spiritual? 'Undertaker, please drive slow, because the lady that you're taking, I hate to see her go.' That's Nancy's father. He hates to see her go and he's trying to make it as slow as he can. She's been dead for nearly three years."

"Been out there lately, to the Oland home?" I'd brought my beer with me. I drank, watching her thin, sad face. She was pretty in a forlorn sort of way.

"No. I wasn't very close to Nancy the last year or so. I've never been near her father since she died. He called me a few times. I haven't seen him."

"You and your red car weren't out there the beginning of this week?"

Carrie smiled faintly, shaking her head. She touched the visor of her cap.

"Couldn't have. My car was in the garage Monday and Tuesday."

"What for?"

Her hands massaged her knees. "If it makes any difference, I took it in Monday before work here and picked it up Tuesday noon. I had it lubricated, and the oil changed. Okay?"

"Think of any reason why somebody would want to hurt Oland this way? With a fake letter?"

"Oh, come on," she said, swinging her legs down. "It's a mean old world. Lots of people get hurt, a lot worse than Mr. Oland. All he has to do is sit around that big house and hide from the daylight and pretend Nancy didn't jump. There are worse lives to live." She left me, adjusting her cap with a flourish.

In the parking lot I stood by her car for a moment, lit another cigarette and decided they weren't any easier on my respiratory system than the non-menthol kind. The only garage sticker I could find anywhere on her car indicated it hadn't been lubricated since November of the year before, seven thousand miles ago. Thinking, I got into my old car and fought for a place in the confusion of traffic.

Beth Eisner was a rangy brunette too, a year or so older than Carrie, not quite as sad. She had a three-room cottage up in Beverly Glenn, a ten-minute climb above Sunset Boulevard where, she told me later, she worked as a secretary. After I'd identified myself she released the chain lock and let me into a big sparse living room. The furniture was

simple, quiet. A bad oil painting of Beth was hanging over the full bookcase.

"I keep thinking this whole block is going to burn down. I sleep pretty well. One thing I always come bolt awake for is a fire engine. I think I can hear them as far away as Oxnard." She took a perch on a low sofa and let me pick my own.

From a canvas chair I asked, "Who would try to make Nancy Oland's father think she's alive?"

She bit her lower lip. "That's what it is?"

"He got a letter, supposed to be from her, telling him to meet her at a certain time out in Palm Springs. He went, waited. When he finally came home he found he'd been robbed."

"Poor Mr. Oland. He wants to believe she's alive."

"You drive a compact?"

"Yes, that's it out in front."

I'd checked. "When's the last time you saw Nancy's father?"

"Something like a year ago," she said. She was wearing a dark pull-over and tan corduroy pants. "I used to go out there to visit him. I had to stop. I like Mr. Oland, but all he'd want to talk about was the possibility Nancy would turn up alive. He didn't really know Nancy at all, not even when she lived with him."

"Was it here that she lived with you?"

"No, an apartment down in Hollywood, one of those fake Moorish ones. Six months, at least, before she died she had a place by herself. Her father doesn't know that."

"What about guys?"

"I'm pretty sure Mr. Oland told you Nancy wasn't much interested in men."

"He said something like that."

"Well," Beth said, "that isn't really quite the story. Nancy knew several men, quite an assortment of people; people Mr. Oland probably wouldn't admit existed. You know, Nancy's mother died back around 1950 and her father started turning off that long ago."

"You've never told him any of this?"

"No, and you shouldn't. He's not going to believe anyway," she said. "Nancy was nervous, high key. She was never quite sure what she was up to. She'd tried a couple of colleges. She was always drifting, looking for some kind of edge, a handle to things." Her eyes closed for a sec-

ond. "I think the last few months of her life she was addicted some- way, to something. Maybe that's why she killed herself."

"I've seen Oland's clippings on the suicide. There didn't seem to be anything suspicious about the others involved."

"On the boat? No, they were straight. Nancy had friends on two or three levels."

"What about Carrie Milligan?"

Beth shook her head. "I guess she's like Nancy, like Nancy several ways, but a little more in control."

"What do you know for sure about Nancy being hooked?"

"I'm not certain," said the girl. Her face had grown paler. "I began to get odd feelings about her, the way she was acting, so I moved out. I did offer to help, in my dumb pigeon-toed way. I maybe should have stuck. I don't know. I didn't like Carrie—or Tamerlane."

"Who?"

"Jack Tamerlane," she said. "He was the one Nancy saw most. I think he also saw Carrie a lot. They were a kind of trio. Tamerlane's a big tall guy, a skinny cowboy-looking guy. He even did do extra work in Westerns now and then, Nancy told me."

"And how straight was Tamerlane?"

She let out her breath. "He was sent up for possession of narcotics, went away a while before Nancy killed herself. Maybe that was the reason." She shrugged. "Maybe anything was a reason. I keep trying to figure."

"I'll check into Tamerlane," I said.

"He's out of prison." She leaned back, frowning. "I heard from a friend, someone who knew us both, Nancy and me. Tamerlane's been out nearly a month."

That would fit. I shook out a cigarette, looked at it, let it slide away. "Yeah," I said.

"You're wondering what to tell Mr. Oland. I'm sorry. I should have kept quiet." She spread her hands. "I still wonder about Nancy, and worry. I suppose I feel she's still alive too."

I pushed up to my feet. "Thanks," I said.

The day was fading, night was coming. You wouldn't be able to see any stars.

I phoned a couple of cops. Jack Tamerlane, age twenty-eight, had been free for nearly four weeks. He had a moderate-sized narcotics rec-

ord. He lived now and worked at a place called The Birks' Works Farms, a tourist attraction run by a remote relative of his, out on the road to Disneyland. They sold country-style lunches and souvenirs to fifteen hundred smog-dulled people a day.

I figured I could get there by freeway in under an hour, talk to Tamerlane before bedtime. If he wasn't there, I could still look around, ask questions, buy a souvenir.

A private cop stood at the redwood gate to Birks' Works Farms.

"I'm Ferguson with the Urban Parole Authority," I said. "Jack Tamerlane around?"

"Employees live in the rustic auto court half a mile down-road. Gate eleven. He's in cottage fifteen. Why you want Jack?"

"Routine," I said, a reason that usually works to avoid questions.

The guard nodded.

I drove on down and turned in at gate eleven. In among some trees were three dozen cottages. I parked next to what I thought might be a willow tree and started to search for cottage fifteen. It wasn't hard to find. A dusty red sports car was resting in the slot next to it. Lights were on in the front room of the shingle cottage, which was a miniature version of the Oland house. Putting my guerilla knowledge to work, I skulked around the back of Tamerlane's and came up in the dry brush under his side windows.

A television set was murmuring and above it I could make out Carrie's voice, not soft now.

"Well, you have to put some faith in me too. I know whether somebody followed me out or not."

"Swell, swell," said Tamerlane. "Stop yelling."

"Come on now," the girl said. "Did you find the stuff?"

"Why sure," he answered. "Taped under her bureau drawer in a plastic bag."

"What's it worth?"

"Oh," said Tamerlane in his slow, careful voice, "it was worth fifty thousand when I gave it to Nancy to hold. Probably sixty, sixty-five now."

"I still say you'll get hurt for sidetracking it."

"Not this late," said Tamerlane.

"You've got old Oland really thinking she's alive."

"So? It got him away from where I'd told Nancy to stow it. I always

got good penmanship marks in school. Miss Cooper always said that was the only thing I did good."

I felt up under my arm, touching the holster of my .38. Quietly I moved around to the front, climbed the small porch and knocked on the door.

When Tamerlane looked out a six-inch opening I said, "I'd like to talk to you about Nancy Oland."

"It's him," Carrie said.

Tamerlane lost his slowness. The door slammed shut. There was running inside and then the back door sounded. I cut around to the car side of the cottage. Tamerlane was half into the red car. He saw my gun coming out, ducked. He popped up and a tire iron came sailing at me. I dodged, and he started running out from behind the car, around the next house.

From the next parking slot I spotted him running through the dark trees, heading for the tourist buildings. I went after him. Once through the woods, Tamerlane scaled a wood fence and I heard him go rattling down a board street. Then it got quiet.

The fence was spotted with lettering, ornate announcements that beyond the fence there was an authentic ghost town. The fence creaked and swayed as the sharp hot wind brushed it. Cutting around, I found the back gate to the town, picked the old padlock and let myself in.

There was one street, two rows of badly imagined frontier buildings, a saloon, a jail, a hotel, a souvenir shop. It was silent, dark, with wax figures leaning against hitching posts, lined up at a long bar, sitting in the hotel lobby. In a buckboard parked outside the livery stable one of the men on the seat was breathing a little. From ten feet away I called, with my gun loosely ready, "Jump on down, Tamerlane."

He didn't move for nearly a minute. Then he stood. "I don't have a gun."

"Over here."

"Why don't you toss yours aside and take me on, man to man?" He hopped to the dusty street.

I grinned. "You're letting the setting overwhelm you."

"I'll take you on if you're not scared." He started to run at me.

I shot him in the leg.

A sticky hot rain was falling. George Oland took back the pictures of

his daughter. "The whole story doesn't ring true, doesn't make a bit of sense," he protested.

I had told him most of what I'd found out, about how Tamerlane had hijacked a shipment of heroin coming in from Mexico, given it to Nancy to hide in a safe place for a while, a safe place like her old room at home. Before Tamerlane had had a chance to do anything he'd been caught on another deal and locked up. As soon as he got out he set about figuring a way to retrieve the stuff. Since Oland never left the place, he and Carrie, who knew Oland believed Nancy was still alive, came up with a way to get him out of the house. When I'd said it all I added, echoing Beth Eisner, "I'm sorry."

"If you knew Nancy you'd know how false it all is."

I left my chair. "I'll get going."

"You haven't found her," said Oland "You didn't even go out to Palm Springs and check."

"Tamerlane admits writing the letter to get you out of here for a day so he could dig around." I stepped around him into the dim hallway. "There's nothing else to find out."

"I want you to stay on the case and find Nancy."

"No," I said. I got to the front door and opened it.

Oland caught my arm as I hit the porch, kept telling me she wasn't dead.



The Girl Who Wouldn't Talk

by Paul W. Fairman

The cerise walls were unforgivable; otherwise, it was just another tavern. Jim Siegal left me there, saying, "Cover this joint, kid. Get some human interest. Find out how they take it in a joint like this. See if anybody drinks one for Tony, come eleven o'clock—you know, one for the road."

So I covered Barney's, feeling low; knowing I had as much chance as a snowball in July on a St. Louis pavement. Human interest.

I envied Jim—and I didn't. Envied him as the *Telegram's* ace crime man, and for the trip, too, that he was taking into Old State Prison. He was slated to be one of the witnesses. He would tell all about it under his own by-line in the morning editions.

From the window I could see the floodlighted walls of the prison and I wondered why they didn't do these things in the daytime like sensible people. At high noon. Why the somber gloom-of-night business?

I thought about Jim. This wasn't his first experience. He'd watched some big ones go in his time. It was routine for him.

Routine! The thought of it suddenly jarred me. A man goes to the hot seat; a reporter watches through a small window, completely detached, physically, mentally, in every way. A few seconds pass. A puff of smoke, a heart stops beating and a reporter has a first-hand account for "the people" in the morning. That simple! That routine!

I wondered how he would do it. I took out my pencil to see how I would have handled the story:

Tony Jarret left Old State Prison last night with every debt paid—not owing anybody a dime. He left in a box.

Not very good.

THEY proved that Tony Jarret killed a man, so last night they

walked him to the electric chair and juiced him into eternity. The vengeance will have to be split half a dozen ways, though, because they claim he killed six in all . . .

Worse. Too cynical. It sounded unfriendly to justice and Tony had it coming. I put my pencil away and went to the bar.

The barkeep was moon-faced, pink-cheeked. He had blue eyes and the barkeep's natural desire to keep everybody happy and nonriotous. He said, "I'll bet you're a newspaperman."

"You looked at the press card in my hatband."

He grinned. "What'll you have?"

I ordered rye and water and looked around. There were a dozen men and one girl in the place. The girl sat alone at one of the tables clutching a tall glass in both hands. She was a blonde, around thirty. She stared straight ahead. At intervals she lifted the glass stiffly to her lips with both arms.

The barkeep brought my drink. I said, "You've seen a few go out in your time? In Old State?"

"A few. I don't like the nights they go. Nights like this are different some way. Everybody watches the clock and gets the glooms."

The clock said 10:05. The witnesses would all be gathered now. The girl stiff-armed her glass.

I said, "Any joint I've ever been in at least two guys would be talking to the blonde."

"Uh-uh. They let her alone."

"Why?"

"She's Tony's girl."

I did a small take. "Tony's girl. Tony Jarret?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"I don't know. I just never thought of a guy like him having a girl."

"Why not? He's human—I guess." His tone made me feel a little angry but I let it pass; he didn't mean it wrong. He said, "She ain't much, though. Dumb—stupid. All she's got is heart. You want another drink?"

He brought it and said, "She spent a lot of time here while he was waiting for his stay. Never wanted to be late for her visits, so she'd get here early and wait. Then they quit letting her see him, but she kept on coming. Force of habit, I suppose."

"Is she going to stay here until—until it's over?"

He shrugged. "I guess so. Icing herself up for it, poor kid. Got here at eight and started drinking. Been drinking steady."

"They sure leave her alone."

"Two of them tried. Now they're scared off, I think. Too bad. She needs a friend."

I watched her awhile. The glass went up and down. The barkeep brought new ones. The new ones went up and down. Her expression never changed. I went over to her table and said, "May I sit down?"

Her dull expression remained. Her eyes stared straight ahead. I could have been in Timbuktu. I sat down opposite her. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Beat it."

"My name is Haney. I'm with the *Telegram*. Would you give me a statement? It would help—"

"Beat it."

"This must be pretty rough on you. Why take the beating? Why not go far away?"

"Get lost."

I got up and went back to the bar. I had another drink and after awhile the clock said 10:45. They'd be walking him in now. Jim would already have half the story down word-for-word in his mind.

My mind was a total blank. The human-interest angle was here, all right, but if she wouldn't talk it was a dud. Ten or twelve grim guys and a gangster-hardened dame—all watching the clock—like people keep track of the minutes of an old year, waiting for the stroke of midnight so they can yell their brains out . . .

I forgot about the guys, the barkeep, Jim Siegal, everything, and began concentrating on the girl. She had to be a story, my story, because she had to have a breaking point. Eleven o'clock would be the zero hour for Tony Jarret's girl. I'd watch and I'd see her crack up and tomorrow morning . . .

She might be hard as nails—pitch drinks down one after another—have a lock on every emotion under that stark exterior so long as she knew Tony Jarret still breathed. But at eleven when they turned him into cold meat, she'd crack, by God! She'd tell the world. And the *Telegram* readers would have it, under my by-line.

I didn't have to wait. I could write the copy now. In my mind I saw her bust like an angry mainspring and scream:

"Tony Jarret was a decent guy! He had more love and more good in him than all of you crumbs put together! What right you got standin' around waitin' for him to die!—and then sayin' nothin', doin' nothin'—like you was enjoyin' it inside—gettin' a real big bang out of it! Go on, you slobs! Gloat! He got it and you didn't. But he was a better man than any of you—and he got a one-way ticket because none of you got the guts to do what he did, you hear me? None of you got the guts! And none of you feel sorry. You don't know how. Tony Jarret had feelings—he had a big heart—and he knew how to feel sorry!"

Then I would put in the bit on how no more words would come. But would she storm out of the joint or do a blackout and have to be carried? I couldn't make up my mind.

10:55. The barkeep got gloomier. "I'm going to have that clock taken down. After this they'll have to depend on their watches."

He flapped a beefy hand, looked at the girl and muttered, "Poor kid. Some of them sure get into stinking messes, don't they?"

I watched her with one eye on the clock waiting for 11:00 when she'd read my copy back to me.

It was 10:58. I took out my pencil. With luck, I'd have a spot right next to Jim in the morning edition.

The minute hand hit the top. Nothing happened. So far as I was concerned, the babe forgot her lines.

She lifted her glass and drank and set it down. The hand swept on past. She never flinched. Nobody did.

How wrong could I be?

The place relaxed a bit but other than that it was the same. It seemed no different from any other night at eleven o'clock—except that a man had just died—and so had my human-interest story. A man died and no one in the bar drank one for him. I was disgusted. These crumbs didn't know the meaning of the word *drama*.

Two men drifted out. A new man came in. He was quiet of face and manner, a little under middle age. He came to the bar and had a drink and then his eyes drifted to the girl. He called the barkeep over and whispered something.

The barkeep fixed a drink and brought it to the girl's table. I perked up a little. This moke was asking for trouble and didn't know it. Or maybe not. Maybe he was one of Tony's men come to make sure she was all right. Or the other way. Tony had made enemies. If she left

with this guy would she be safe, and would I be able to follow? I wished Jim would show. I sat tight.

The girl sent the drink back with no message. The man whispered again and the barkeep made a second trip. I emptied my glass.

The girl's head turned slowly sidewise and she looked in the man's direction. Her face was expressionless—but she kept the drink.

The man ordered another for himself and slowly walked to the girl's table. He stood there looking down at her. I couldn't hear what he said but whatever it was it worked because he sat down.

They talked some and he ordered again. Fifteen minutes later she nodded wearily and they got up together. He took her arm and they headed out. —

I sagged, really disgusted now. Any minute Jim would bounce in—all business. "*Okay kid—where's your copy?*" And me without a god-damn line. A friend of Tony's; an enemy of Tony's—nuts! Just an easy pickup. A cheating husband propositioning a girl sitting alone.

As the door closed behind them I saw that the barkeep had cheered up. He was smiling. "I'm glad," he said. "Real good."

"That's your story," I snapped. "Me—I can watch gin-mill harpies operate back in town. I don't have to come out here."

The barkeep wouldn't ruffle. He shrugged.

"Caught her right, when she needs a friend. That's why I like it. He needs a friend too. A couple of people needing a friend bad and going out arm in arm. That's how it should be."

"You know him?"

"Sure. He always shows up on nights like this. Name's Parry—that mean anything to you?"

I frowned. I'd heard the name, but I couldn't tab it.

The barkeep said, "He's the executioner and not a bad guy, not a bad guy at all."

I ordered another and waited for Jim.



Heir Presumptuous

by C. B. Gilford

Inspector Verade still had his coat and hat on and was within inches of the telephone when it rang. The voice, in between sobs, identified itself as that of Mrs. Maple, old George Devon's housekeeper.

"It's Mr. Devon . . . he's sitting behind his desk . . . he's dead . . . there's a knife sticking out of his back . . ."

It was then one-thirty in the afternoon. The Inspector was wearing his hat and coat because he had just returned from lunch.

"When did this happen, Mrs. Maple?" he asked.

"Couldn't have been more than a few minutes ago, sir."

He phrased his next question carefully and hopefully. "Do you know who did it, Mrs. Maple?"

"I think . . ." The woman's sobbing punctuated her answer again. "I think it must have been one of the twins, sir . . . I saw him running away across the lawn . . . just before I found Mr. Devon."

"One of the twins? Which one?"

"I don't know . . . they look so much alike . . ." The sobs became a continuous wail.

Inspector Verade waited no longer. He gathered up Constable Jesson, his fingerprint man, and together they drove to the village of Chelton. It was a twenty-minute drive. The Devon house was the largest edifice in Chelton and he knew right where it was. George Devon had been something of a friend. They'd been chess opponents during some of Verade's dull times.

Mrs. Maple, eyes red and bosom heaving, greeted them at the door. They went to the corpse immediately. George Devon was in his study. He'd been sitting behind his desk, but now he was slumped forward. He must have been in the act of writing something. An old-fashioned

quill pen and an open inkwell lay near his right hand, and there were splotches of spilled ink on the desk blotter. His mane of white hair fanned over the papers on which he'd been working. The knife, a kitchen variety, protruded from his back.

"Now what's this," Verade wanted to know, "about your seeing one of the twins running away from the house?"

But the question was repeated rather than answered. "Yes, what is this about one of the twins running away from the house?"

The repetition came from one of the two young men who were suddenly standing at the open French doors that led out to the garden. Verade shifted his gaze from the corpse to them, and felt something of the same amazement he'd always felt whenever he'd looked at them. Dressed identically as they usually were, they couldn't be told apart. Each was tall, tanned, blue-eyed, good-looking, in exactly the same way.

As he watched them he saw their glances, almost as one, travel from him to the body in the chair. And again in unison, looks of surprise paled their faces.

"What goes on here?" one of them asked.

"Your uncle's been murdered," Verade said.

They were clever, and they knew too well that he was acquainted with them sufficiently not to expect them to show shock or grief. "I see," one said gravely. "And Mrs. Maple saw one of us running away from the house, so you think one of us murdered him."

"I just got here," Verade said. "I'm making no assumptions till I get more facts. But I think each of you should make a statement."

He left Constable Jesson to take pictures, look for fingerprints, and conduct a general search of the immediate premises. Then he escorted Mrs. Maple and Donald and David Devon across the hall to the dining room. There he invited them all to sit down.

"You first, Mrs. Maple," he began gently.

The woman's story was simple, though told with difficulty. She had thought neither of George Devon's nephews had been home. They seldom were, night or day. They had too many other interests, around Chelton and elsewhere. She remarked all this bitterly.

It happened just after lunch, she said. Mr. Devon had eaten a light meal alone. Right after lunch he returned to his study to work. He was writing some letters to the state legislature, protesting something about

taxes. Having been a wealthy man, Mr. Devon had been concerned about taxes. Mrs. Maple had been here in the dining room, clearing away dishes, when she'd heard a kind of cry. At first she thought it had come from the garden. That was what had made her look outside, and that was when she saw one of the nephews running away. Then, worried, she knocked on the study door. When there was no reply, she opened the door and discovered the crime.

The Inspector made no notes. He had an excellent and exact memory. And he was already forming a theory.

"I think that now you can understand your position," he told the two young men. "An eyewitness has placed one of you in the vicinity of the murder at the time of the murder. And besides that, you were seen running away. A suspicious, guilty action, you must agree. Now what do you have to say?"

"Well, I have a perfect alibi," one began.

— "Which are you?" Verade asked without embarrassment.

"I'm Donald."

"And what's the alibi, please?"

"I was at the Shaggy Bear . . ."

"The inn and bar, you mean?"

"Right."

"You were there alone?"

"Sally Fender was there, of course. She tends the bar. She'll vouch for me if you ask her. I was there from the time the place opened, at noon, till just ten minutes ago."

"But you arrived here with your brother David. Where did you find him?"

"I met him at Allen's Garage. The Jaguar's there being fixed, and we wanted to find out when it would be ready."

"All right, you met David at the garage. Why did you decide to come home?"

"We thought we should have a talk with Uncle George. About getting us another car. Sharing a car's just too much to ask." Donald Devon spoke smoothly and innocently. But Verade knew him. He knew both of them.

"Well, there'll be no more trouble about cars, will there?" he remarked.

"What do you mean?"

"Now that your uncle's dead, you'll both have plenty of money. You two are the principal beneficiaries of his will, of course."

Donald smiled. "Do you mean to say you're accusing one of us of murdering him just to get money for a car?"

"George Devon was a wealthy man," Verade pointed out, still gently. "There'll be money now for cars and lots of other things. I knew him personally, remember. He was in some respects on the stingy side. And he complained constantly how neither of you were able to live within what he thought were very comfortable allowances. I'll be frank. I don't reject the possibility that one of you could have been very impatient for your uncle to die, and very disturbed that he was in such excellent health."

Donald Devon's voice was soft too. "Well, I have the alibi. And 'a twin' was seen running away right after the murder. So you must be accusing David."

"Not yet. Not till I've heard from David."

And Verade turned his gaze to the other nephew. The young man sat there, completely unperturbed. "What would you like to hear?" he asked. His voice too was identical with his brother's. It was uncanny.

"Your alibi, if you have one," Verade said. "Mrs. Maple telephoned me at one-thirty. The murder had just been committed. Where were you at that time? Allen's Garage?"

David Devon smiled. "I'm afraid I can't claim that," he said, "though I wish I could. But Mr. Allen wouldn't back me up. No, I met Donald at the garage as he said. But we got there at the same time, and only stayed a minute. I'd say we didn't get to the garage till a few minutes before two."

"The garage," Verade said, "is only about a five-minute walk from here."

"That's right."

"So I'll repeat. Where were you, David, at one-thirty?"

Verade wasn't prepared for the answer he got. For a fabrication, possibly, one that would be either more or less obvious. But certainly not for a blatant contradiction.

"I was at the Shaggy Bear," David said. "Ask Sally Fender about it if you like."

The thing confused Verade for a moment. "You mean you were both at the Shaggy Bear," he began.

"No," David said, "I was there alone."

"But your brother said . . ." Verade was still groggy.

David smiled slightly, as one might at a secret joke. "I'm not my brother's keeper," he answered. "So I can't speak for him. As for me, I was at the Shaggy Bear."

Verade sat silent for a moment, his brain whirling, but gradually, ever so gradually, beginning to put everything in its place. He glanced alternately at the two brothers. They were portraits in innocence, and the portraits could not have resembled each other more.

"Let me get this straight," he said finally. "You are both claiming the same alibi?"

"Looks like that, doesn't it, Inspector?" Donald said.

"But one of you has to be lying, therefore," Verade reasoned.

"Not I," Donald said.

"Not I," David echoed.

The sheer boldness of it was finally getting through to Verade. And the more he understood, the angrier he got.

"I begin to see," he told them.

"What do you see, Inspector?"

"It's only a theory. And it may err in some details. But the basic framework of your little plot begins to appear. It all depends on the fact that you look identically alike, doesn't it?"

Neither of them answered. But on the other hand, neither seemed worried.

"First of all," Verade continued, "you agreed together to murder your uncle. To get his money, of course. But in planning the crime, you realized that committing murder involved great risks. So like all deliberate murderers, you tried to eliminate or minimize those risks. Probably you considered lots of possibilities. But the trouble with each method was that you knew you would be immediately suspected because you had the obvious motive. You presumed correctly that any good detective always looks for the motive first. You faced up to that. You two would be suspected. That couldn't be avoided. What you could do, however, was to commit the murder in such a way that the actual performance of the deed couldn't be proved against you. Am I right?"

One of them—Verade had already forgotten which was which—shrugged and said, "This is your story, Inspector."

"All right, I'll continue it then. You decide this. Kill your uncle in the most simple, direct fashion. You would be suspected anyway. As a matter of fact, one of you was seen running away. But you had provided even for that. Because one of you was establishing an alibi by being at the Shaggy Bear at the time planned for the murder. So it's up to the law to prove which one of you was where. It's quite clever really. I'll be the first to admit that if we can't prove which one did it, but only that one of you did it, we can't arrest and prosecute either one of you just at random. Even with an eyewitness testifying, no jury would convict with a fifty percent possibility of error. Now tell me, I'm pretty warm, am I not?"

One of the twins smiled, insolently, Verade thought. "Come now, Inspector," he said, "if we're as clever as you make us out to be, we're not going to admit being so clever. If we confessed to the plot you described, you could arrest us for conspiracy and hang us both."

"So I could," Verade answered with grudging admiration. "You had that eventuality figured out too, didn't you? Well, it proves the whole thing to my satisfaction, even if it wouldn't satisfy a jury."

"Then we can be glad you're only investigating, not judging us, eh, Inspector?" The smile was definitely insolent.

Verade tried to order his thoughts: It was a difficult thing, sitting there, facing these two. He could feel that his countenance was flushed and warm, revealing his anger and frustration when he didn't want them revealed.

But he couldn't help it. Donald and David Devon had always been pet peeves of his. He'd heard enough about them from poor old George. Verade had their full history. Sons of George's ne'er-do-well younger brother, mothered out of wedlock by an itinerant actress, they'd been abandoned to the care of their uncle before they were of school age. George had endured them. They were twenty-two now, had been expelled from several of the best universities, and were equally unappreciated by the traffic policemen and the conscientious fathers of young ladies in Chelton. George Devon had made them his heirs in the hope that he would have a long life and that the passage of years would change the boys. Now he had paid for his folly.

"I suppose, Inspector," one of the twins was saying, almost reading his thought, "you'd take a personal pleasure in nailing us on this."

Verade was suddenly aware of the weight of his fifty-three years, of

his gray hair and his sagging muscles. Even his brain was tired, and these two had approached their crime with young, fresh minds. This was the intellectual gauntlet flung down, the challenge of youth to age. They'd known that a crony of their uncle's would work this case. Well, he'd go to work then.

He chose to ignore the accusation. "Please come with me," he told them. He led them back to the hallway, stopped outside the study door, and called for Jesson.

"Get prints on these two," he instructed.

They submitted without protest. "Of course, you'll find our fingerprints all over that room," one of them pointed out. "We live in this house, you know."

"What about the knife handle?" he asked Jesson.

"I looked at that right away," the man answered. "It's been wiped clean."

He didn't look at the twins because he was afraid he'd find them smiling. Instead he gave Jesson further instructions, about the disposal of the body and the rest of the necessary routine. Then he announced that if he was needed in the next half hour or so, he could be contacted at the Shaggy Bear.

"Can we tag along?" one of the twins wanted to know. "It would be real interesting to hear what Sally has to say."

"Yes, I'd planned on taking you," Verade admitted.

They followed him out to his car and obligingly gave directions on the quickest route to the Shaggy Bear. It was a four-minute drive, Verade noted. And the place itself was rather as he thought he remembered it to be. Considerably off the main thoroughfare, a rustic, two-story building of old-world architecture, it was scarcely the sort of place to be much frequented by the Devon twins unless the barmaid was exceptionally pretty.

She was. She was clearing away from the table of the only two customers, and they were just departing when Verade and the twins arrived. She stopped abruptly when she saw Verade's companions, perhaps in surprise, perhaps for their admiration.

Sally Fender was tall, and probably what Verade's generation would have described as "full-blown." Her hair was dark and she wore it rather long. Her eyes were perhaps blue, but dark too, and her skin, though almost devoid of cosmetics, had a high, healthy color. She wore

a white, peasant sort of blouse which swooped low from her shoulders, and a plentiful but nevertheless provocative skirt. Between these two garments, perhaps to emphasize the smallness of the girl's waist and the generous curvatures above and below it, was a wide, tight, black leather belt.

"Miss Fender?" Verade asked in his most authoritative tone.

She nodded.

He showed her his police credentials. "I'm looking into the murder of George Devon," he said, and waited for her surprise, and for the apprehensive looks she gave both of his companions. "I'd like to ask you some questions, Miss Fender, and I'd like you to lock the place up for a few minutes so we won't be disturbed."

She obeyed willingly, and while she was locking the doors, he put Donald and David where he wanted them, in chairs at opposite ends of the room. The room was big enough so they couldn't communicate. Neither could they overhear him when he placed himself and the girl on a pair of the high stools in front of the bar. To make certain, he asked his questions in a low voice.

"Was one of these young men in here earlier this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir."

"One of them, or both?"

"Just one."

"Which one?"

The girl hesitated. "He didn't say," she answered finally.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I can't tell them apart."

"And the one who was here didn't identify himself?"

"No, sir."

"You didn't ask him which one he was?"

"No, sir."

"They come in here frequently, I imagine. When one comes alone, don't you ever ask him which one he is?"

"I used to. But they're always playing jokes. I never knew when they were telling the truth. So I stopped asking them."

"I see." He wasn't disappointed. He hadn't expected any positive identification from Sally Fender.

"Did one of them kill Uncle George?" she asked suddenly, unable to restrain her curiosity any longer.

"I don't know who killed Mr. Devon," Verade answered truthfully. "I'm merely checking on the alibis of everyone connected with Mr. Devon."

Sally nodded as if she understood.

"Now," he said, "I want the full story of Donald's or David's—whichever it was—visit here earlier this afternoon. I'd like to get as many details as you can remember. Whatever either you or he said or did. Anything would be helpful."

She furrowed her brow in thought. Very pretty girl, the Inspector reflected again. Damned attractive. She had an animal magnetism about her. Even he was aware of it.

"Well," she began finally, "Joker was here waiting for me when I came to work at twelve."

"Joker?"

"That's what I call him. Because I never know when it's Don or Dave."

"I see."

"Mrs. Miller, she owns this place. She sort of cleans up in the morning, and then when I get here at noon, she goes upstairs to bed. That's so we can both work in the evenings. She's up in bed now."

"Did Mrs. Miller see . . . Mr. Devon?"

"I guess she did, but she doesn't know 'em apart either. But like I said, I got here about twelve. Maybe I was a little late. I stopped to do some shopping in the village. I bought this belt. Do you like it?"

She lifted her blouse a little away from it for him to see. It was a very new and shiny black. He said he liked it. He was very patient.

"Joker was waiting for me outside the door, and when he came in, Mrs. Miller went upstairs. Joker had a couple of beers, and I had one. There wasn't anybody else here."

The Inspector pounced lightly, trying not to frighten her. "Did he drink those beers in glasses or bottles or what?"

"Oh, glasses, like always . . ."

"Where are those glasses he drank out of?"

She gave him a puzzled look. "Do you mean the . . . the exact glasses?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can't say . . . I washed 'em and put 'em back with the rest."

Verade tried hard to conceal his disappointment. It couldn't be that

easy, he told himself, finding fingerprints on beer glasses.

"Go on," he said.

"Well, there's not much to tell."

"How long did he stay?"

She thought, then said, "I guess it was about ten minutes to two. You know that's funny, come to think of it."

"What's funny?"

"He was awful worried about the time. He kept asking me what time it was, about every ten minutes."

Verade permitted himself to smile. This was precisely the way he had guessed it. Of course, the twin here at the Shaggy Bear had been concerned about the time. So Sally Fender would remember what time it had been, and could answer the predictable questions she was answering now. The twin at the Shaggy Bear had known what time the murder would be committed, and had stayed just long enough to make sure the deed had been completed. If he, Verade, could ever identify which brother wielded the murder knife, this evidence of Sally Fender would establish the other as an accomplice.

"Your customer," he continued to Sally, "was here then from twelve till almost two. A couple of hours. Surely something else must have happened during that period, besides his drinking a couple of beers and his conversation about what time it was."

"Well . . ." Sally was hesitating again.

"This is very important," he urged her.

She smiled suddenly, a flashing smile that revealed that her teeth were as perfect as the rest of her. "He kissed me a few times," she said.

"Here in this room?"

"Sure, there wasn't anybody else here. He didn't do anything impolite. Just put his arm around my waist and kissed me is all."

Verade pounced again. "Which one kissed you, Sally?"

She gave him the puzzled look again. "Which one?"

"Are both the Devons in the habit of kissing you?"

She hesitated once again, but then when she spoke it was utterly without embarrassment. "I don't let everybody kiss me. But I like both the Jokers, so I let them kiss me."

Verade was tempted to despair. He asked a few more questions, but received no useful answers. Finally, he told Sally to go behind the bar

and stay there, and he went across the room to where one of the brothers was sitting.

"You're Donald?" he began.

"David," the young man corrected him with a smile. "Did you find out anything interesting from Sally, Inspector?"

"I was getting her version of your—or your, brother's—visit here awhile ago. Now I'd like your version."

David Devon obliged. He arrived here about noon, met Sally outside the door, walked in with her, had a few beers, didn't know how many exactly, exchanged pleasantries with the girl, yes and a few kisses too when there weren't any other customers, left a bit before two. Long before the recital was over, the Inspector felt the gnawing suspicion that whichever brother had been here had had the foresight to brief the other one about his tête-à-tête with Sally. They'd had the opportunity for such a conference when they'd met at Allen's Garage.

But the Inspector nevertheless tried the same technique with Donald. And with the same dismal, inconclusive results.

It was then almost four o'clock, and George Devon had been dead for almost two and a half hours. The Inspector telephoned Constable Jesson at the Devon house to check on possible progress.

The doctor had arrived, Jesson said. There was little doubt about the cause of death having been the knife wound. The corpse had just been removed. He had fingerprinted Mrs. Maple, and was taking prints in the study. There were plenty of them, but none on any object that seemed connected with the murder. Jesson was aware of the Inspector's great faith in the science of fingerprints and was concentrating his efforts in that direction.

"How is it coming?" one of the twins asked when Verade left the phone. They were both sitting on stools at the bar now. But amazingly, and perhaps more from fear of unnecessarily arousing greater zeal in Verade rather than out of deference to their dead relative, they weren't drinking. Sally stood silent behind the bar. The Inspector joined them.

"It's too early to make a prediction," he said evasively.

"You still have your eye on us though, eh, Inspector?"

"Well, after all, there's Mrs. Maple's testimony."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Maple."

Verade was feeling weary again, weary and defeated. He had to admit it to himself. Though he was certain by this time that one of the

Devon twins had committed the murder, he was also fast becoming aware that they had planned it together with an almost diabolical cleverness. Yes, diabolical, that was the word. They knew the spot they had him in, and they were gloating over it. One of them had done it, but as long as he didn't know which, he couldn't touch either of them.

"I'll have a brandy," he told Sally, with a silent apology to old George Devon.

"May we join you, Inspector?" a twin asked.

He shrugged.

They ordered scotch with water. Both of them ordered the same thing. Everything always the same. Identical. But could two human beings be so positively identical in appearance, in voice, in habit, in action, so that even a person as intimate with them as Sally couldn't differentiate between them? He brooded on that.

"It was all done very shrewdly," he said after awhile.

Nobody commented.

"But the whole scheme depended on this absolute similarity between you two. Now tell me, do you really believe there is such an absolute similarity? So absolute that no difference can be detected anywhere?"

"We have that reputation, you know, Inspector," one twin said.

"Yes, I know. But that's because you've been in contact only with people who've not been trained to observe. Sally there, for instance, is not very observant."

"But you are, is that it, Inspector? With your police training and experience. Then how would you tell us apart?" The twin who spoke was definitely superior in his attitude. He sat there toying with his glass, apparently enjoying the game, however dangerous it was.

"I haven't figured that out yet," Verade admitted. "But I have no doubt there is a way to tell you apart. If not in your appearance then maybe in your actions. The way you do various things. The way you hold a glass when you drink, for instance. Or the way you . . ."

He was struck suddenly with an idea.

"What's on your mind, Inspector?"

It was Verade's turn to smile, and he did. "I was just thinking back to my younger days," he said slowly, "when I went around kissing girls. I seem to recall that I definitely had the idea in those days that all girls did not kiss in the same way."

Did he detect just the slightest hint of a worried frown on the face of the twin he was watching? Perhaps.

"Gentlemen," he went on, "would you consent to a little experiment?"

The frowning face smiled again. "You mean we should both try kissing Sally to see if she thought we kissed her differently?"

"Yes. Then perhaps Sally might be able to remember which one of you really kissed her earlier this afternoon."

"Inspector, it would be a pleasure to try it."

But the other twin's face was serious. "Do you honestly think, Inspector," he asked, "that identification based on a kissing game would hold up in court?"

"That's my worry, isn't it?" Verade asked him.

The twins shrugged together. The gestures were precisely the same.

"Do you mind co-operating, Miss Fender?" Verade asked the girl.

She shook her head, and her dark hair played about her white shoulders.

"Then would you come around here, please?"

She walked around the bar, and Verade looked to the twins. They consulted silently with each other, and then one of them set aside his drink and stood up.

"Now which are you?" Verade asked him.

"I'm David."

"All right, David. Now would you mind kissing Miss Fender? Be thoroughly relaxed about it. Just do it naturally. And you, Miss Fender, please remember one thing while you're being kissed. Remember *how* you're being kissed. Remember precisely how David kisses you, how he holds you. Do you understand?"

The girl nodded. But she was nervous too. She stood there immobile expressionless, waiting for the embrace.

David Devon, however, approached her with supreme confidence. He put both hands on her shoulders and looked down into her face for a brief moment. Then he drew her body closer to his own, and bent to meet her upturned face. They kissed. The young man's hands left the girl's shoulders, and began to travel caressingly down her back.

"Stop!" Verade shouted.

The suddenness and unexpectedness of the command broke them apart instantly. They all stared at Verade.

"I've been a blind fool," he announced, but he spoke in triumph.

They waited for more. The faces of both the twins were grim.

"There were two ways of tackling this," he told them. "I had to prove either that one of you was at your uncle's house at one-thirty this afternoon, or that one of you was here at that time. And I knew fingerprints was the way to do it. The fingerprints even of identical twins are not alike. But the murder weapon had been wiped clean, and any other prints around the house would be inconclusive. I thought of prints here in this room. But both of you frequented the place regularly, so prints would prove nothing unless they were found on some special object."

He paused. The twins were clever. They would follow his trend, perhaps even be ahead of it. But they said nothing.

"I thought of the beer glass one of you used this afternoon, but Sally claimed she washed that. But there's something else. Can you guess what it is? No?" Verade was enjoying himself now. "Well, I'll tell you. I remembered it as you were kissing her, David. That belt Sally's wearing. She just bought it today. And I remember her saying, 'He put his arm around my waist.' Gentlemen, there's somebody's fingerprints on that belt. May I borrow it for awhile, Sally?"

The girl's hands fumbled with the buckle. The twins moved too. But the Inspector was quicker. The revolver in his hand menaced both brothers.

"Don't touch it, please," he warned them.

The looks on their faces, of chagrin, defeat, and of mutual reproach were exactly the same.



The Scar

by Donald Honig

The boy was sitting on the curb at the corner, looking at the streets. It was a very hot day and the concrete was being baked by the sun, the streets glaring with it. The avenue was quiet and almost empty in the thick, humid, oppressive air. He was a rather small boy, not more than ten. He was wearing an undershirt and short pants and sneakers. His knees were quite dirty. His profound young face was stained with sweat, his eyes staring dully at the street where the relentless sun was softening the tar to a point where it would give when stepped upon.

None of his friends were around. They were probably either sitting in the candy store where the big humming fan was, or else were standing on the sidewalk in front of the Capstone Theater where they could feel some of the cool draft from the air-conditioning unit. His undershirt stuck to his perspiring back and he could feel the sun hard on his neck and his neck turning redder and redder and the sun in his hair like fire. He was thinking vaguely of the pitcher of ice water that his mother kept in the refrigerator, when the car came slowly down the school block and pulled into the curb. He didn't look up until the second door had slammed and then he saw the two men walking away from the car. They were very large men, square-shouldered. They were wearing broad-brimmed fedoras and, despite the heat, suits and ties and, again despite the heat, did not look like other people looked in the heat, not irritable or exhausted or despairing, not even hot. They crossed the street, walking peculiarly in step, shoulder to shoulder, and went into the bar there.

The boy stared across at the shadowy bar, his eyes intent, unblinking. A few moments later the men appeared again, walking from the bar, big, dark-seeming in the hot yellow sun glare, suddenly baleful to

the boy as he watched them march, again in step, across the street toward him, coming at him as if they would walk right over him. They stepped up onto the curb and looked down at him, their eyes small and cold beneath the shade of hat brims.

"Do you know where Dan Bannon lives, kid?" one asked.

"On Grant Avenue," the boy said.

"Which house?"

He turned around on the curb, squinting in the bright sunlight. He pointed with one small grimed finger. "In the house next to the bowling alley," he said, looking up at them, shading his eyes in shabby salute, and then the huge towering figures moved from against the sky, their shadows rolling over him. He watched them walk down the avenue, which was empty in the midday heat, watched them walk not fast but not casual either, with an intense implacable urgency, walking shoulder to shoulder, their arms swinging stiffly. They crossed to the next block and turned into the house next to the bowling alley.

The boy was following. He walked slowly, tugging at his pants, his perspiring face curious, interested. He crossed to the next block and came to the house where the two men had turned in. He stood in front of the open door. The hallway was dark, somber. He edged toward it, looking up at the old dirty bricks, the grotesque fire escapes, his sneaked feet stepping over the threshold, moved by an ingenuous, incorrigible curiosity. He stood there, just inside the doorway, his shadow lying in front of him, the sun and the heat blazing behind him. He stared up at the narrow flight of stairs, his face wrinkling suspiciously. He walked into the hallway and began going up the stairs, one slow silent step at a time. He came to the first landing and stopped, listening intently. He heard voices coming from above.

He went down the hall and around to the next flight of stairs and was halfway up, one foot advanced to the next step, when the voices suddenly seemed to erupt, one voice rising above the rest for a moment in shrill beseeching and then there were two explosions, almost simultaneously, almost undistinguishable. A door tore open and the doorway was immediately blackened by the two men. They seemed to come through the doorway together. He saw them through the railing, their faces fixed in grim fulfillment. He watched their legs cutting above him and then coming around and appearing at the head of the stairs and then coming down quietly, quickly, so quickly that their

shoes looked like dancing. He looked up at them! They were coming down the stairs shoulder to shoulder. The boy pressed back against the wall, watching their faces, and then their enormous terrifying passage, that did not seem real because neither face so much as looked at him, like a thundering in a dream. He was looking down at their square unmoving shoulders and backs, that were rigid like blocks of wood being supported by the snap-walking legs. He watched them turn and go down through the bannister this time, heard them going down the other flight of stairs and then they were gone.

He looked back to the open door. The house was very quiet. He continued up the stairs, slowly, turning at the top and moving cautiously, fearfully, toward the door. He moved into the doorway and his heart almost stopped and his breathing did for a moment gasp and stop, as he came face to face with Dan Bannon's tall gaunt figure, with a pair of glaring yellow eyes. Dan Bannon was standing tall, his hands clasped tightly over his middle; he seemed unable to breathe or speak or move, only to glare at the boy with outraged and dying eyes, and then began to sway, mysteriously, soundlessly, his eyes closing. The boy watched with cold and fascinated terror as the tall stick-like figure swayed, the face strained and shut and spiritual until the teeth came whitely through the lips, and then something snapped and the figure was flashing forward, falling with a soft thud. The boy jumped back and then stared solicitously at Dan Bannon who was lying face down, his hidden hands still clasping where he had been shot.

His heart constricting with terror, the boy ran down the two flights of stairs, the steps and the bannisters and the walls darting dizzily around him. He ran out into the sunlight and stopped as suddenly as though it were a wall. Then he ran again, to the next block, where he had been sitting. The car was gone. He stared at where it had stood for a long incredulous moment as if it had disappeared in a miraculous flash, as though there was a miracle about the whole thing. He looked around at the empty steaming streets. A man was tilted in the doorway of Pete's Capstone Restaurant across the street, staring at him (or so the boy believed). He began running up the block, past the school and into the empty lot at the end of the block.

He went through the lot, the weeds rising to cover him. He sat down in the weeds, cross-legged, his face bewildered, anguished. His heart was tortured with guilt, with the thought of unwitting but

nonetheless reprehensible complicity. Dan Bannon's eyes were still glaring at him, yellow and hating; and then Dan Bannon was lying on his face, dead but still hating, still raging and accusing. *I didn't mean it*, the boy thought, beginning to cry. He lowered his face, covered it with his hands and sobbed, his small shoulders, bare except for the straps of his undershirt, shaking.

When he had stopped crying, he looked at the ground. Gradually his eyes dried. For awhile his eyes burned and then that stopped too. His fingers pushed idly at the dirt, his eyes dull and moody, watching the erratic wanderings of an ant. He picked up some dirt and let it stream down upon the ant. He stared at the dirt. In a minute the ant reappeared, moving out of the dirt, and he watched it travel into the weeds.

He thought of the men. He hated them. The new emotion, the hatred, came into him in a fierce, strong wave. It was the first time he had hated anyone so passionately, so desperately. He wished he could do something to them, something very bad. He wished he could kill them, do the same to them as they had done to Dan Bannon. He hadn't even known Dan Bannon. He had seen him coming out of saloons, staggering on the avenue, and he had seen him going into that house. That was all he knew of him, except that he had seen him die. He knew I told them, he thought.

At last he got up. Stealthily, deftly, he stepped from the weeds, out of the empty lot. He stood gazing down the block toward the avenue, his face brooding, sullen. He could not go home. He felt as if he did not belong there any longer, there or anywhere. So he walked, and he walked. He walked until sun and light were gone from the sky, until the heat was gone from the air, until a strange, pervasive coolness had come into the darkness. He walked on, walking up streets and down streets, all the while the inward eye seeing Dan Bannon and impelling the boy, making him walk farther and faster, making him afraid but undaunted of the night, the strange dark streets where alien radio music floated and people sat on the brick stoops in front of the clapboard houses.

And then the radio music stopped and the people were gone and the streets were not merely dark and quiet, but also frightening. The houses were dark, the only light coming from the tall spectral streetlights that were not really lights, that had nothing to do with people.

He was standing by the fence over the railroad overpass when from out of the dark, loud and rumbling and sinister like hordes of ancient warriors, came the freight train, endless seeming, entrancing in its grim stolid purpose, in its remorseless forward flow—rolling loudly into the tunnel, filling the night with clanking and roaring and then suddenly gone.

Running then, more than anything else afraid of the thought that had come into his mind of jumping down onto one of those terrifying trains and riding away on it into the vast undivided night, away from his own fear and dread, his mind tormented by Dan Bannon's eyes.

He saw the lights of the police station and he ran toward them, going up the wooden steps and running up to the desk. There were several policemen standing around. They looked at his small, panting figure.

"What's your trouble?" the policeman behind the desk asked.

He looked up at the policeman, swallowing.

"Well?"

"I want to tell something."

"You do, do you? Well, what is it?"

"Something I did," he said. "I didn't mean to do it."

The other policemen were looking at him. "He's a murderer I'll bet," one said.

"He sure has that fierce look," another said.

He heard people walking in then and whirled as his mother cried his name. He ran to her and fell against her, beginning to cry. She kneeled and hugged him, saying frantic half-weeping things to him.

"Where did you find him?" his father's voice asked.

"We didn't. He just walked in this minute."

"He said he had something to confess," one of the policemen said, a sly jocularly in his voice.

"I do, I do," the boy said, turning around to the policeman, wiping at his eyes. Turning to his mother he said, "I told them where Mr. Bannon lived."

There was a moment of startled silence.

"What?" one of the policemen asked.

"Whom did you tell?" the man behind the desk asked.

"The two men."

"Which men? What did they look like?"

"When was this?"

The policemen came toward him. He looked up at them, afraid, as if it were intimidation. Their faces and eyes were suddenly like a thousand faces and eyes, pouring at him with stolid fluidity, creating a circle, a cage, over him. The police station was intensely quiet.

"I don't want to tell," he said softly, his voice sullen with fear.

One of the policemen knelt in front of him and smiled at him. "What's your name, big fella?" the policeman asked.

"Richard," he said.

"Now you tell us, Richard," the policeman said, speaking clearly, slowly, "and this is yours." He took a quarter from his pocket, putting it on his palm under the boy's eyes.

The boy stared at the quarter, then at the policeman, then at the man behind the desk who was standing up and leaning forward watching him over the heads of the others with great interest, then at the rest of them, at his mother and father too who suddenly seemed as cold and impartial as the rest, looking at them all with hurt, tearing, accusing eyes. He did not say anything.

"All right," the man behind the desk, the sergeant, said, walking around, coming through the others and taking the boy by the hand. "Let me take him." The boy looked up at him, afraid, trying to pull away, but the sergeant's hand insisted firmly.

"Where are you taking him?" the boy's father asked.

"It's all right," the sergeant said, walking away from the others, holding the boy by the hand.

The boy squirmed and tried to pull away, but the sergeant would not let go. The sergeant's hand was hard, like something that was angry. The sergeant took him down a small, dimly lit corridor, the boy walking slowly against the policeman's leg, staring intently, breathlessly, fearfully at the silent empty cells. The cells were ghastly, terrifying. The boy began to tremble. The feeling of guilt was surging over him again. *They're going to put me in jail*, he thought. His eyes began to become warm again, filling with tears. He did not want to go into one of the cells. He would rather have died than be compelled to sit alone in the dark behind the stiff black bars. He looked up at the policeman, his face appealing mutely.

The sergeant stopped before one of the cells and the boy looked into it. What he saw made his body tense as though swept by an electric

current and he drew back, would have run except for the sergeant's strong hand holding his.

The two men were sitting there, their faces turned toward the boy, their eyes watching him somber beneath the brims of their hats.

"Are these the men you saw, Richard?" the sergeant asked.

He was cringing against the sergeant's leg, staring through the bars at the two men who were sitting close together on the shabby cot, looking back at him through the bars with flat, dull, unblinking eyes—not threatening or afraid, but moodily hostile, incorrigible, cold.

The boy's mouth tightened. He did not want to tell. Suddenly, he felt sorry for the men sitting somberly in the hot gloomy cell, sorry for them even though they had killed Dan Bannon and he had once hated them enough to kill them. But that was gone now, over. He did not want to utter anything and burden himself with a repetition of the original guilt, the original mistake.

He began shaking his head slowly. He said it quietly, his voice boy-stubborn, boy-firm, saying it for now and forever. "No. I never saw those men."

He pulled his hand free from the sergeant's and ran away, up the dark, hot corridor and past the gloomy empty cells, glad he had said it, satisfied, eager to get to his father and mother.



Spitting Image

by Mann Rubin

It happened on a Thursday as Richard Williams stepped from his analyst's office and started down the hall. A door opened at the opposite end of the corridor and the figure of a man emerged and moved toward him. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have given it a second thought as the building was a recognized medical center; patients could be there for any number of therapeutic reasons, from false teeth to ingrown toenails.

However, viewing this particular man, Williams knew instinctively that he, too, had just ended a session with his psychiatrist and was feeling the same inner rumblings and after-effects common to all individuals at such a time.

Williams automatically lowered his head and quickened his stride. Yet something about the man's walk had struck a responsive chord, and as they drew abreast Williams threw him a sly, cursory glance.

What greeted him was the most disturbing sight he had witnessed in forty years of living. The man was an exact duplicate of himself, not only in physical appearance, but down to the smallest detail of clothing. The effect was jolting, nerve-shattering, like a three-dimensional nightmare.

Stunned though he was, Williams, nevertheless, managed to work his legs until they carried him around a corner and beyond the startled gaze of his look-alike. Leaning against a wall, he tried to comprehend the phenomenon as best he could. Was it his imagination? Had his eyes suddenly gone bad? Surely no two people could be so identical in a million years, not even twins. He touched his clothes, his face, the elevator button. Everything felt real; therefore, he wasn't dreaming and it *had* to be an optical illusion. Probably it was an overhead

shadow that created the strange effect. Slowly the chilling sensation dissolved. One of these days he had to check in with an optometrist. He smiled, dabbed at his face with a handkerchief and waited for the elevator. By the time he reached his import office, the incident was no longer in his thoughts.

It was the calm before the storm. In the following week Williams encountered his look-alike four more times. Each encounter took place in the same corridor after a session with his psychiatrist. The pattern never changed; they would come toward each other, eyes downcast, until inches apart, then, as if by pre-arranged signal, their heads would rise, and they could study each other with silent, frightened stares. No word was ever spoken or a stride broken. It was as if both knew instinctively that they could never be friends.

By the end of that first week, Williams was certain that his nameless twin hated him with a hatred so intense, so murderous, that the man obviously was a psychopath with homicidal tendencies. Once he fully accepted this one point of difference between them, Williams began to think of the possible consequences that might arise. At his very next session he broached the subject to Dr. Smith.

"Want to hear something crazy?"

"Indeed," said Dr. Smith, a large, apple-cheeked man, who always seemed to be grinning.

"There's someone who looks exactly like me going to another analyst on this floor. I see him every time I leave your office."

"Indeed."

"He walks like me, dresses like me, yesterday he even wore a flower in his lapel the same color and shape as mine."

"Indeed," repeated Dr. Smith a third time.

"I wish you'd stop using that word."

"Sorry," grinned the doctor. "Shall we get back to the time your father accidentally hit you with his nine iron on the 18th green?"

When the hour ended, Williams was as perplexed as ever. Apparently, Dr. Smith gave no credence to his story, dismissing it as insignificant to his overall therapy. Perhaps he was right. Pausing just inside the office door, Williams took a fast inventory. Here he was, after four years on the couch, close to a successful, well-adjusted life; he had resolved his problems with his wife, his two sons, and his import business was quite solvent. Suddenly, he was allowing fleeting glimpses of

a stranger to disrupt this mountain peak of serenity. He was a fool to let the malignant cycle continue; it had to be smashed abruptly, short-circuited once and for all. Thus, leaving his psychiatrist's office, Williams, instead of going his usual direction, turned the opposite way, and without a backward glance, headed for an elevator station in the rear of the building.

But even in this maneuver danger lurked. After all, wasn't this the route his adversary usually traveled? The thought of riding side-by-side in an elevator with the man shook Richard to his roots. Seeing a door marked Fire Exit, he quickly ducked inside. The fact that it was eight flights down seemed unimportant; what mattered was his alert, positive action in a time of crisis. Even Dr. Smith would agree he was thinking "healthy."

He hadn't gone a dozen yards when, rounding a corner, he nearly collided with his look-alike. The man, like himself, was breathing hard, perspiring and seemed genuinely unprepared for the confrontation. Again his face and clothing appeared identical with Williams's. And again, as Williams studied him, he felt the man's eyes narrow with hate and suspicion. There was no question but that the man regarded him as a mortal enemy. They stayed locked in each other's glare another ten seconds, Williams trying his best to meet the man's stern, maniacal gaze unflinchingly; then several nurses passed across their line of vision, and Williams, seizing the opportunity, leaped through the first revolving door he came to.

That night Williams dreamed nightmare after nightmare. Always he was pursued by a shadowy, insane killer, who would find him out no matter where he sought refuge; once he stopped running, he knew he was as good as dead. The chase lasted and lasted.

When morning came, Williams was too weak to move. He pleaded illness and stayed in bed. He knew it was cowardly, but he couldn't face another chance encounter with the man until he had convinced Dr. Smith that these horrendous meetings were actually happening, and the doctor was committed to helping him put the potential madman someplace where he could never trespass on Williams's life again.

At noon, his regular hour on the couch, Richard Williams phoned Dr. Smith and described in urgent detail the latest incident in the strange dilemma plaguing him. When he finished, Dr. Smith was silent for a long time.

"You're certain he isn't your twin?" he asked finally.

"Positive. I've got a trunk full of records and diaries proving I was an only child."

"And yet you say he resembles you feature for feature?"

"Except in the eyes. I told you that; he has the look of a madman at times. I've never felt so frightened of anyone in my life."

"Indeed."

"Help me, Doctor, please. You're the only one I can turn to, the only one I trust."

"What is it you want me to do?"

"Check with the doctor at the opposite end of the corridor. Find out the man's name, his background, and why he's suddenly hounding me like this."

"I suppose I can do that," murmured Dr. Smith. "I'll call back as soon as I get some information."

"Thank you. I knew you wouldn't let me down. What would I ever do without you?"

The phone went dead.

Twenty minutes later it rang again. Richard pulled it to him like an oxygen-mask.

"Hello, Richard."

"Yes. I've been waiting. Did you contact the other analyst?"

"Indeed. His name is Dr. Jones, just moved into this building ten days ago."

"See, I told you, that's when it started!" shouted Williams. "Each time he'd be coming out of that damn office!"

"Let's try to stay calm," cautioned Dr. Smith.

"Yes, yes. What else did you find out?"

"He has no history of mental illness. In fact, up to now he seems to have led as quiet and routine a life as anyone else."

"I don't believe it," remarked Williams incredulously. "If you could see that crazed look. I tell you, he shouldn't be allowed to walk the streets."

"According to Dr. Jones he's married, lives in a middle-income home, has two children, and runs a business just across town from you . . ."

"What kind of business?" interrupted Richard, suddenly alert, apprehensive.

"He's in exports."

"And his children—what sex are they?"

"Two girls, I believe."

"How old?"

"Six and ten. But why are you so interested?"

"Don't you see?" cried Williams. "Everything matches, only in opposite ways. I'm in imports, he's in exports. I have two sons, he has two daughters, exactly the same age."

"That's absurd. Mere coincidence."

"Is it? Then why haven't you told me his name?"

"I was coming to that," said the Doctor hesitantly. "It's William Richards . . . However, let's wait until your next visit before jumping to any . . ."

But Williams had heard enough. Grimly he returned the phone to its hook; nothing anyone, including Dr. Smith, could say would undo the cobweb of circumstances suddenly ensnaring him. Even down to the twisted-around names, he and William Richards were linked as exact opposites; diametrically as different as night and day, they shared lives that unknowingly ran parallel to each other.

Reasoning along this line, Williams saw that for every sad moment he had ever experienced his duplicate had probably known happiness; for every failure he had endured, William Richards had no doubt been blessed with golden success. No wonder he hadn't gotten all the breaks he deserved; without being aware of it, he had been in a tug of war for every inch of his existence.

However, there was one consoling thought; he was on the sane end of the see-saw, which meant it was William Richards who was doomed to live by the black, twisted ravings of a distorted mind. Still there was peril, for if this warped person accidentally recognized the true nature of their co-existence, he would most certainly respond with explosive violence.

Instinctively, Williams knew it was he who had to break the chain first or face annihilation. Even if he severed just one thin strand in their linkage it would be enough alteration to end forever the bondage strangling them.

But how? Direct elimination was out of the question, as his duplicate, judging from his insane look of rage at their last encounter, was by now armed against any surprise attack. No, the blow when it fell

had to strike an unprotected area, a person or thing easily accessible, yet vital to William Richards' very core of existence.

For the rest of the day and far into the night, Williams explored the darkest corners of his psyche. By the time dawn was breaking, he had found a means to bring about his duplicate's end, a plan so simple, yet so devastating, that once accomplished would mean the immediate and total dissolvment of William Richards in every way.

In the morning, Williams kissed his wife passionately, patted his children with positive affection, and subways to his office feeling more confident and alive than he had in years. His secretary found him in such high spirits that she asked for a raise and got it. In gratitude, she typed out a stack of letters she'd neglected for some time. It was a sunny morning for everybody.

At eleven-thirty he left his office, telling his secretary he had an early lunch appointment uptown. She smiled and fluttered her eyelids. Riding in a cab to Dr. Smith's building, Richard leaned back and went over the plan he had devised; it was so cunning it frightened him.

He paid off his cabbie at a side entrance of the building and hurried inside, head down, coat collar up. Boarding an empty self-service elevator he rode it to the ninth floor without interruption. Once there, he doubled back along a series of corridors until he was at a window leading out onto a fire-escape. Working silently, he lifted the window and stepped outside; his watch showed he still had fifteen minutes before his regular noon appointment with Dr. Smith.

Directly beneath him, if his thinking was accurate, was the office of Dr. Jones, analyst. It was this link he had chosen to shatter. He descended swiftly, noiselessly; edging along the landing, he was soon in position to peer into a window of the doctor's suite.

Dr. Jones, a thin, nervous, bird-like man, fitted snugly into the pattern of contrasts connecting Williams and his duplicate. Even his office furniture seemed the antithesis of Dr. Smith's warm, simple taste. Williams felt gratified that fate had at least blessed him with the superior analyst both in appearance and intellect; perhaps this alone was why his thinking was more definite, more concise in meeting this current emergency.

He watched as Dr. Jones concluded with a woman patient, assisted her with her coat and escorted her from his office. It was the chance for which Williams had hoped.

In a matter of seconds, he slipped through the window and stood firmly entrenched in the room. His heart palpitated wildly. Somewhere a door closed and, in a moment, fading footsteps and the faint aroma of pipe tobacco announced that Dr. Jones was permitting himself a brief period of relaxation before the arrival of his next patient.

Donning the gloves he had especially acquired for the visit, Williams quickly inspected the room for a convenient weapon; a heavy steel letter-opener caught his eye and he tested its razor-sharp edge with satisfaction. To think such a commonplace item would soon free him from the deepest hell he'd ever lived through. He moved behind the door and awaited the doctor's return.

Seconds trickled into minutes; five, six, seven minutes went by and still Dr. Jones hadn't reappeared. Williams squirmed restlessly; time was too precious to shave it this close. What had gone wrong?

Williams gripped his weapon tighter and let the second hand of his watch sweep away another two minutes. Obviously, he couldn't wait for Dr. Jones to meander back at his own leisure. If the killing was to be successful it had to be done at once, even if it meant stepping beyond the confines of his private office.

Stealthily, on tiptoe, Williams searched the other chambers of the suite. Each time he opened a door, he expected to find his victim innocently awaiting his attack; each time, he was doomed to disappointment. Dr. Jones was nowhere to be seen. Urgency made Williams bolder; he probed behind drapes, charged into closets; his desperation changed to anger, his anger to white-hot fury. Irrationally, he felt that Dr. Jones was not cooperating; he was not giving Williams the chance to break the linkage, to win back his individuality and walk the earth without a carbon copy. The fool, he could have killed him with his bare hands.

But time was running out. Now there was less than a minute before his regular appointment with Dr. Smith. He thought of Dr. Smith, thought of the friendly face, the well-trained mind, his aura of authority and confidence; how good it would feel to enter once more that sane, orderly, familiar world of right and wrong. Yes, he needed Dr. Smith's rock-like stability; a real analyst, who could be depended on never to leave his office during working hours.

He straightened his clothes, cast a last regretful look about the deserted office and backed into the hallway. The door shut, the latch

clicked into place. Perhaps it was for the best. Ahead lay relief, the couch, and a man who understood him. He sighed deeply, turned and moved down the corridor.

Facing him in the doorway of Dr. Smith's office stood his duplicate, clutching the same type of letter-opener that Williams still held in his hand. They remained motionless through an eternity of seconds, then simultaneously realizing the crime each had red-handedly caught the other at, they slowly advanced, weapons poised, mouths grim, stalking each other in deadly silence.

It was precisely eleven minutes later that Dr. Smith and Dr. Jones, old friends as well as colleagues, while finishing their coffee in a nearby drugstore, heard the first distant wail of a police siren. It brought a smile to the face of Dr. Smith, who was busily munching up remnants of a banana cream pie. He stopped chewing and glanced at his nervous companion.

"Well, Bert, I guess that's another hundred dollars you owe me."

"A bit premature, aren't you?" said Dr. Jones irritably, resenting the arrogance his friend always displayed at moments like this.

"Come now, old chap, when have my prognoses ever been wrong, particularly in an open and shut case like this one?"

"Yes, but this time you've had the gall to predict the exact behavior pattern of two men weeks before they even met?"

"How naïve you are," chuckled Dr. Smith, inwardly annoyed at having to reveal his strategy before the final results of their bet were officially definite. "A month ago when you told me you had a patient who, after years of treatment, still couldn't face his own deep wish for total self-destruction, I proposed our little wager. I, too, was dealing with a specimen of equal spinelessness, Richard Williams. Knowing you were in the process of moving into my building, and naturally, with your cooperation, I began laying the groundwork so that when these two men encountered each other their unconscious desires for death would be at the breaking point."

Outside the first police siren had been joined by the screams of three or four others, each closer and more piercing than the next. Dr. Smith beamed pompously.

"You know the police could be descending on this spot," said Dr. Jones stubbornly, "for any one of a number of reasons."

"Reasoning scientifically," continued Dr. Smith, as though he had not been interrupted, "I saw that if both patients were too weak to face their own destructive urges, they might transfer them to someone they instinctively felt was as cowardly as themselves. This pattern was confirmed at their very first meeting, when each endowed the other with all their own evil, repressed qualities. Thus, with each new encounter, plus the misleading morsels we supplied about their names and backgrounds being so interchangeable; their identities became more fused, more strangulating."

"I'll admit," Dr. Jones said, "that this all makes sense. But it's still in the realm of theory. And I refuse to accept it as fact. Just as I won't accept the notion that if you hadn't dragged me down for coffee at this hour, we'd have both been murdered."

"Brutally hacked to pieces across our wall-to-wall carpets."

"How can you be so sure that it would all happen just as you—"

"But it has," Dr. Smith broke in, casually indicating a group of prowling cars stopping before their building. As they watched several uniformed policemen dashed by and disappeared into a revolving door. Wiping his lips with a napkin, Dr. Smith arose. "Come, I'm curious to see if they felt the death wish as strongly as I suspected," he said, and raced off, leaving his colleague to take care of the check.

By the time Dr. Jones caught up to him again, Dr. Smith was back on the eighth floor, smoking his pipe and mingling with a crowd of curious spectators, who were trying to peer beyond the shoulders of a police cordon hastily assembled at the scene. After awhile both doctors managed to secure positions that were unobstructed; for a long moment, neither spoke as they studied the sordid details stretched out before them.

"You see," said Dr. Smith, finally, "I was a hundred percent accurate—right down to their choice of weapons."

"Horrible, really horrible," said Dr. Jones.

"Indeed," said Dr. Smith. "Especially when you think of all the free hours it suddenly leaves us with." He puffed on his pipe. "So I do win the bet."

He continued to puff on his pipe and gazed a last time at the two corpses sprawled at his feet, one tall, lean and dark, the other short, fat and balding; similar, at last, in that both were bloody and dead.

"I'd appreciate cash," Dr. Smith said to Dr. Jones.

Case of the Kind Waitress

by Henry Slesar

Back and forth, between the kitchen and dining room of the Hotel Gordon Restaurant, Thelma Tompkins kept a worried eye on the empty corner table. Once, in her anxiety, a plate of steaming tomato soup slid precariously to the edge of the tray she carried, and Marian, the hostess, stabbed a warning across the room with her hostile eyes. But Thelma Tompkins hadn't broken a dish in eleven years as a waitress, and her instinct didn't desert her now. Still, Marian couldn't resist a muttered jibe. "What's eating you?" she said.

"Mrs. Mannerheim," Thelma answered, looking again towards the deserted table. "She's almost half an hour late. I wonder if she's okay?"

Marian snorted. "Stop being a mother hen. The old lady'll be here. She always is."

But Thelma continued to look concerned, and the frown lines didn't improve the imperfect features of her drab face. Her stringy brown hair, steamed out of curl by the heat of the kitchen and the coolness of the air-conditioned dining room, became more disordered as the evening grew later. When Mrs. Mannerheim finally took her customary place at the corner table, Thelma looked almost as ill as the old lady.

But not quite. Mrs. Mannerheim, the outlines of her tiny shrunken body not even visible within the loose-fitting black crepe dress, looked especially white-faced and wraith-like. She was a really *old* lady; past ninety Thelma guessed. And tonight it looked like Death was her neighbor.

"How are you, Mrs. Mannerheim?" Thelma rested her hands on the table and put her mouth close to the deaf old ears. "I was worried about you when you didn't come in. Same thing tonight?"

"Yes, dear, yes," the old woman said, opening the table napkin with

palsied hands. "Same thing tonight, Thelma. And don't you worry about me."

"You weren't sick or anything?"

"A little," Mrs. Mannerheim smiled. "Just a little."

"Gee, don't you think you should call the doctor? You really don't look well."

"Oh, shush with your doctor talk. I haven't seen a doctor in thirty-years, not since that old fool Leverett told me I was going to die." She patted Thelma's hand. "But thank you for worrying, Thelma dear, it's nice to have somebody worry about you."

The waitress blinked back the tears, the same easy tears that could be summoned forth by sad movies, scrawny cats, or her young brother, Arthur. She went into the kitchen, wiping her eyes with the heel of her hand, and told Jeff the cook that Mrs. Mannerheim was there. He didn't require details; in her eight years of residence at the Gordon Hotel, her menu had never varied. A glass of tomato juice, a lean slice of roast beef, a boiled potato, carrots, milk. When she brought the order to the table, Mrs. Mannerheim tried valiantly to cut the meat on her plate. Thelma volunteered, as usual, and reluctantly as ever, the old lady permitted the service.

"You're a good child," she said softly, watching her.

Thelma laughed. "I'm forty-four, Mrs. Mannerheim. I'm not a child any more. Do you want more butter on your potato?"

"Can you sit and talk a little, Thelma?"

"Oh, gee, Mrs. Mannerheim, I don't think so now; we're kind of busy."

"Maybe later? There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Sure, Mrs. Mannerheim, later."

The restaurant emptied at ten-thirty, and Marian gave her the nod. But before Thelma got out of uniform, she went to the old lady's table and sat down.

"What was it you wanted to talk about, Mrs. Mannerheim?"

"About you, Thelma. Do you mind?"

"About me?" The waitress laughed, and brushed self-consciously at her unruly hair. "Nothing much to talk about me, Mrs. Mannerheim."

"I wanted to know how you're getting on, Thelma."

"Oh, same as usual, Mrs. Mannerheim."

"And that brother you told me about. How is he?"

"Arthur? Oh, he's okay, thanks. He's not making millions or anything in the store, but it's a living." She looked away, her lips whitening.

"You're still worried about him, aren't you? The last time we talked, you were worried about how unhappy he was, having to run that drug store."

Thelma said nothing.

"You love your brother a lot, don't you?"

"I guess so. He's all I have since Pop died, Mrs. Mannerheim. I mean, all those things I said about him that night—well, I didn't really mean them. He's just young; he can't help getting into scrapes. You know how it is."

"Of course." The old lady coughed, and the sound echoed emptily within the hollow crepe dress.

"You want some more water?"

"No, I'm all right. Well, that's not really true." She tried to laugh. "Not really all right, Thelma. For the first time, I really *feel* old. I've been so sick lately . . . sometimes I think the time's coming . . ."

"Oh, Mrs. Mannerheim!" The tears welled again.

"Now don't fret. It's different, thinking about death, when you're old like me. But what I wanted to tell you, Thelma, I mean in case anything should happen to me, is that I think a lot of you, and I want to help you. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"No."

"I'm talking about money, Thelma. I'm what they call a rich old widow, more money than sense. I have a niece in California, and she'll have to get something, just because she's family, but she doesn't care two cents worth for me. But I wanted you to know that I've taken care of you."

Thelma settled her face, half in bewilderment, half in sudden expectation.

"Taken care of me?"

"In my will. You've been a good friend to me, Thelma, these past few years. I'm grateful to you. When I die, you'll be able to leave this place and do what you want. And your brother—"

Thelma's hand fluttered to her throat. Arthur!

"Oh, Mrs. Mannerheim, you don't have to do this—"

"But I want to, Thelma, I really want to. It will be a considerable

legacy, believe me. I don't know why I should be so rich, but since my husband's death the money just seemed to grow and grow. It's kept me comfortable, and now I want it to make you happy."

She seemed to have difficulty breathing; she clutched her stomach and shut her eyes.

"Mrs. Mannerheim—"

"It'll pass, Thelma, it'll pass . . ."

When her eyes opened again, they were steady and bright.

"I don't have long, Thelma," she said. "I have dreams about my mother, wearing a long white dress with flowers. Do you believe in dreams?"

"I don't know," Thelma Tompkins whispered, wondering if this moment were one.

It was only ten past eleven when Thelma arrived home, and Arthur was sitting crosslegged in front of the television set, looking ruffled and sleepy enough to have been ensconced there for hours. She would have been indignant any other night; now she settled for a milder approach.

"For heaven's sake, Arthur! What time did you close the store?"

"Only a little while ago," her brother scowled.

"You can't keep shutting up so early, Arthur. You really can't afford it. You know what Pop always said, there's an awful lot of business after ten o'clock . . ."

He didn't answer. He put his beardless chin deep into the collar of his opened shirt until it covered his pouting mouth. He frowned and rubbed his hand over the stubbly blond hair on his head. He looked more boyish than ever when he sulked; Thelma could hardly believe he was almost thirty-five.

"Arthur, I have something to tell you."

"Write me a letter."

"Don't be nasty. This is something important. More important than television."

"What'd you do, get canned?"

"Arthur, this has something to do with *you*."

The personal pronoun caught his interest. He lowered the sound on the receiver and turned to his sister.

She told him the news. He listened with an attentiveness he had

rarely shown any speech of hers before, refraining from puncturing her story with his needle-sharp questions. When she was done, the tension left him like an uncoiled spring, and he sagged into the armchair.

"How much do you think?" he said dreamily. "How much, Thelma?"

"I don't know. There's all sorts of stories about her. Her husband was in the canning business, but he died, oh, years ago. Still, she must have invested the money, that's why it's so much. And she looks so sick, the poor old thing . . ."

"That's the tricky part," her brother murmured. "If she died soon, like in the next couple of months, I got a couple of deals I'm interested in . . ."

"Arthur!"

"Don't get excited, I'm not wishing your girl friend bad luck. But if she's really as sick as all that . . ."

"I don't even want to *think* about that side of it. It's just nice to know that someday . . ."

"Yeah, sure, someday," Arthur Tompkins said. "How old did you say she was?"

"I don't know for sure. Ninety, maybe more."

The man smiled, with his boy's face. He reached up and turned off the television set, but he continued to stare at the blank gray screen as if still seeing pictures there.

For two months of evenings, Thelma Tompkins kept her eyes on the corner table, and night after night, the old lady who had long ago established squatter's rights arrived at varying hours. The last remnants of color were slowly draining from her cheeks, the shuffling walk was becoming a totter. Marian, the restaurant hostess, watched the decline of Mrs. Mannerheim and clucked in concern, not for the old woman, but for her own sense of order.

"Just *look* at the old thing," she said. "I'm afraid she'll die right in the middle of dinner. You'd think a woman like that would go to a *home* or something."

Thelma didn't reply. She had become more attentive than ever to the old lady, spreading the napkin on her lap, slicing her roast beef extra small, filling the water glass herself. But even as she redoubled her efforts to please old Mrs. Mannerheim, she knew that the motive of sheer human kindness had been sullied since the woman's an-

nouncement. She knew it was more than that now, that there was selfish purpose in her solicitousness. But Thelma felt no shame or guilt; there was Arthur to consider now too. The responsibility of her love was clear.

But the next step was inevitable. As month succeeded month, as the tiny figure of Mrs. Mannerheim grew more and more ethereal, Thelma found herself unable to keep what was once a fear from becoming an unspoken wish. *Why doesn't the old lady die?*

Mrs. Mannerheim didn't die. Each night it seemed that the fire of life in her shriveled body was going out, but somehow it glowed weakly and burned on. Once, she collapsed over the table, just as Marian had feared, but the fainting spell passed. For a period of a week, she was too ill to make the journey from her third-floor room to the restaurant below, and Thelma brought up a tray of food each night, expecting with every opening of the hotel door to find the old lady unbreathing and stilled forever. But Mrs. Mannerheim was alive, if not well, smiling gamely, her tiny head motionless on the pillow of her bed.

Spring passed, and then summer, the winter cold returned to the city, chilling old bones and blood, bringing disease and death to the aged in their hotel rooms and boarding houses. But each night, the corner table was occupied.

"I'm sick of waiting," Arthur said one morning.

"Arthur!"

"Don't Arthur me, Thelma. You're sick of it too. You're getting to hate the old woman."

"Hate? What are you talking about? Why, I'm very *fond* of the old lady—"

"Sure, that's what you tell yourself." He laughed abruptly. "But you don't talk about her the way you used to. It's as if you don't like to talk about her. And I'll bet she's giving you a hard time too."

"Don't be ridiculous." She couldn't look at him. How could he have known? She *did* feel tension with the old lady. Mrs. Mannerheim had begun to complain all the time, quarreling over the quality of the food, accusing Thelma of indolence, once even of padding the bill. One night she had been so vexed with the waitress that she had petulantly forgotten her usual twenty-five-cent tip. But it was only natural, Thelma thought; when people get old and sick, they get querulous . . .

"I can see it in your face," Arthur said, leaning forward insinuatingly. "You're getting to hate the old woman more every day. She's taking a long time to die, isn't she?"

"I won't listen to you!"

"It's almost eight months now. What makes you think she won't live to be a hundred?"

"But she's so sick—"

"Then why isn't she dead?"

"Arthur!"

"Why not help her along, Thelma?"

He blurted out the words, and from the surprised look on his face, it was obviously without regard for timing. But the thought must have been simmering for a long time before it was spoken. Thelma was too stunned to answer, but he took her silence for interest, and went on.

"It would be easy, really easy," he said. "And it wouldn't even be *wrong*, Thelma, that's the best part. Think of how the old lady is suffering, sick the way she is. An old woman like that, why, she'd welcome a little peace. And you can give it to her, Thelma, so easy!"

"I'm not listening!" she said frantically, but shut only her eyes.

"You could do it so simply, nobody would ever know. I'd help you, Thelma. I'd show you how to do it real simply. Everybody who knows the old woman thinks she's ready to kick the bucket; they'll never be suspicious."

"Stop it!"

He smiled at her. "And you know how we could do it, Thelma? With the food. The food you serve her every night. She'd never even notice it, an old lady like that, her taste buds shot the way they are. Just a little bit of powder in every dish, Thelma, just a little bit, night after night, until . . ."

"You're crazy! You're absolutely crazy, Arthur!"

"Sure, sure, only listen to what I'm saying. I have plenty of stuff in the back of the store, Thelma, all we'll need. Then you put a pinch into the food every night. It would be easy for you, wouldn't it? Now wouldn't it?"

She forced herself out of the chair, gasping as if fighting her way out of a whirlpool, and ran from the room.

Arthur didn't follow her. He turned on the television set and remained silent the rest of the morning. He went to the drug store in

the afternoon, and returned after midnight. Just before bedtime, he said:

"Poor sick old lady. It's a mercy killing, Thelma."

Then he went to bed.

Arthur didn't mention his idea for another month. Thelma waited for him to bring it up, but he didn't. Finally, she was forced to say it herself.

"Poor Mrs. Mannerheim," she said.

"What?"

"She looks so bad. She can hardly walk. Sometimes, when I see her suffer, I think you were right, Arthur, about mercy killings. I mean . . ."

Arthur had good sense. He didn't smile, or even look smug. He merely nodded, soberly, clucked his sympathy, and then waited a few minutes before saying:

"Suppose I bring something home from the store tonight, Thelma? For Mrs. Mannerheim."

"All right," Thelma said dreamily, almost as if she hadn't heard.

Jeff, the cook, merely nodded at Thelma when she walked into the kitchen; he knew Mrs. Mannerheim had arrived. He handed her the tray; she placed it on the cart.

She paused in the tiny anteroom that led to the stairway descending to the restaurant lounge, and lifted the dented cover of the entree plate. She took the small brown envelope from her apron pocket, and sprinkled a minuscule amount of the powdery stuff over the roast beef. Then she put the cover back and wheeled the cart down the aisle to the corner table.

She hadn't been nervous during the performance of her action, but as she waited by Mrs. Mannerheim's table while the old lady struggled to bring nourishment to her feeble body, her fingers were so-tremulous that she had to conceal them beneath the apron.

There was no reaction from the old woman. She ate the meat with the same mechanical lack of interest she always displayed.

When Mrs. Mannerheim left, Thelma dropped the quarter tip into her pocket, where it rested against the small bag of poison.

The next night, it was just as easy.

So was the third night, and the fourth.

But Mrs. Mannerheim didn't die.

"I don't get it," Arthur said. "Didn't she even look worse? Nausea? Anything like that?"

"No. But it's so hard to notice any difference in her, Arthur. I mean, she looks so sick all the time."

"Well, just relax. Better to keep the dosage small; we can't take any chances."

"Yes, Arthur."

"Look what I brought you," her brother grinned. "A present."

She took the package from him and crowed with delight. It was from the drug store, and it was perfume, the sale price still marked in grease pencil on the box.

The next night, Mrs. Mannerheim didn't come down to dinner, and Thelma enjoyed a sudden hope that the ordeal was over. But the old lady returned the following dinner hour, and spoke only of having slept through the evening meal, dreaming dreams of her mother in a long white dress.

Another week passed, and Mrs. Mannerheim didn't die.

"Are you *sure* about this poison?" Thelma said to her brother, no longer afraid to speak the word, now avid for success.

"Of course, I'm sure! But maybe we ought to increase the dose a little. It's bound to get her soon—"

"But it's not, it's not! She doesn't seem any worse than she ever was, Arthur. Sometimes I think she'll live forever—"

"We don't have forever. Increase the dose," Arthur said grimly.

Thelma increased it. Nightly, the powdery stuff went into the old lady's food. For another two weeks, fourteen dinners, lightly seasoned with poison, Mrs. Mannerheim seemed to improve in health, until the dreams of the moneyed future seemed to grow more distant and indistinct, until Arthur began to voice the doubt that was growing in her own mind.

"What if she changes her mind? What if she changes her will?"

"Don't say that, Arthur!"

"It can happen! You told me how nasty she gets to you sometimes. What if she decides you're not such a buddy after all? What if she has a fight with you? What if a million things?"

"It can't happen, it can't!" Thelma sobbed.

"Anything can happen!" her brother shouted, his eyes hating, his voice hating.

"I won't let it happen," Thelma promised. "I won't let it, Arthur."

She reported to the restaurant that evening with a passion for certainty burning in her breast. No more small doses, not bit-by-bit extermination; she wanted something final, conclusive.

At ten o'clock, Mrs. Mannerheim hadn't arrived.

"Where is she?" Thelma asked the hostess, who shrugged.

"Where's Mrs. Mannerheim tonight, Marion?"

"How the devil should I know?" Marian said crossly. "God, you'd think that old dame owned this restaurant. She probably dozed off again—"

"Maybe I should check. Maybe I should call her on the house phone."

"You've got tables to wait on, don't forget that."

"But maybe she's really sick, maybe she needs help."

"Oh, for God's sake, you make *me* sick. All right, call her, see if I care if the people go hungry."

Thelma went into the hotel lobby and picked up a dialless phone. It rang twice in the old woman's apartment and Mrs. Mannerheim answered in a barely discernible voice. No, there was nothing wrong, she said, she simply wasn't hungry. Could Thelma bring her up a little something? No, it wasn't necessary. It wouldn't be any trouble at all. Thelma said, a sandwich or some tea or something. All right, Mrs. Mannerheim said, a little tea would be nice.

The waitress went to the kitchen and put some hot water into a pitcher. Then she put a cup and saucer onto a tray, and removed two tea bags from the larder. She went to the hotel elevator and pressed the button marked Three.

When she walked into the room, Mrs. Mannerheim said, "You're a dear girl," and didn't rise from her chair. "I was too weary to make it downstairs tonight, and my appetite isn't very good."

"I understand," Thelma said. She turned her back to the old lady and placed the tray on the table near the door. She placed the teabags into the steaming pitcher, and reached into her apron pocket.

It was empty. She had forgotten the poison.

"You didn't bring the milk?" the old lady said, struggling to her feet.

"No!" she answered angrily. "I forgot the milk, Mrs. Mannerheim."

"I can't stand tea without milk, Thelma. Couldn't you get me some?"

Thelma whirled and glared at the old woman. "I don't have any milk, Mrs. Mannerheim. You can drink it without milk!"

"But I *can't*!" the old lady whined. "I simply can't, Thelma. I've always had milk with my tea, ever since I was a little girl. You know how it is, a habit like that—"

"I don't, I don't!" Thelma cried. "I don't know what it's like! I haven't always had everything I wanted, Mrs. Mannerheim. Do you understand that?"

"Why, Thelma—"

"I've had to work for what I wanted, Mrs. Mannerheim. You think I'm a waitress because I love it, because the restaurant's my *home*? You think I like greasy kitchens and dirty dishes and complaining old women—"

Mrs. Mannerheim looked shocked. Then she drew herself up with dignity. "You shouldn't talk to me that way, Thelma."

"I'll talk to you any damn way I please!"

The old lady gasped.

"You're a rude, naughty girl, Thelma. You're not at all the person I thought you were. And if you think I'll stand for it, you're mistaken. I'm calling my lawyer this minute and changing the will—"

"Don't touch that phone!" Thelma cried out as the old lady reached for the receiver, intercepting the motion with a heavy hand on the bony wrist.

"Now you *stop* that, you awful child!"

"*I'm forty-four years old!*" Thelma shrieked, and no longer caring, or thinking, threw herself at the old woman as an animal would pounce upon prey, a primeval instinct guiding her to the throat, the windpipe, the source of air and life. Mrs. Mannerheim didn't resist beyond a faint touch of her fingers. She seemed so ready for death, so well prepared for its coming that her withered body went limp even before Thelma's enlarged red hands enclosed her neck with the strength they would need to kill her. Death came so quickly to Mrs. Mannerheim that Thelma was still holding on when the door opened behind her and the chambermaid screamed the scream that broke the spell . . .

The important thing, Thelma told herself, was Arthur. Over and
CASE OF THE KIND WAITRESS

over, she said his name in her mind, but never once aloud, not once, throughout the ordeal of arrest and imprisonment and endless questioning.

But then it came out, and all because of what *he* had told her, the tall gray hulk of a man at the police station, who said:

"But why did you have to kill her? Why couldn't you wait? A sick old woman like that . . ."

"Sick?" Thelma repeated, and laughed. "She wasn't sick . . ."

"But she was, very sick. They performed an autopsy, and they know. She had a parasitic infection, dangerous in a woman her age. Probably the only thing that was keeping her alive was the treatment she was getting. Small doses of arsenic."



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B AHA #3

Ghost of a Chance

by Carroll Mayers

In all of County Fermanagh you would likely find no citizen less superstitious than Michael Doyle. To some, it was imperative to circumvent diligently a black feline or sidestep an angled ladder. Other precautions were legion. By and large, Doyle considered such thinking childish nonsense.

Today, though, as he sat in the front room of the neat cottage while Dr. Carmody attended his wife, Doyle's mind was churning with converse speculation. Could there be anything significant about Sarah's sudden coronary, coming only a month after he'd met Molly Brennan? Could he look upon the seizure as opportune, even felicitous? Aside from some funereal fantasies and convictions he deplored, Sarah had been a good wife, tending to his creature comforts all these years. But never had she fired his blood as did Molly. Never had her simple touch constricted his chest and set his temples pounding.

Now, and might the good saints understand and sympathize for his harboring such a wonderment, could it be that Sarah's attack meant that soon he and Molly—

Dr. Carmody emerged from the bedroom. The physician was the best in Aughnacloy and, in the moment of stress, Doyle had considered no other, but had sent a neighbor lass posthaste to fetch him, after Sarah had been stricken while clearing away the supper dishes.

"H-how is she, Doctor?" Guilt over the macabre pondering which had gripped him made Doyle's query break; he arose unsteadily from his chair.

"She's resting comfortably," Carmody said. He was a portly man, brisk and efficient, yet with an understanding mien. "I've given her some medication to ease her distress."

"She'll be all right?"

"I've little doubt of it." The doctor's smile was reassuring. "The seizure seems relatively mild. We'll know more definitely after a bit of checking."

Doyle believed he comprehended. "A cardiogram, Doctor?"

"Yes," Carmody nodded as he picked up his bag. "Don't worry, Mr. Doyle; once the medication takes hold, your wife should have a restful night. I'll stop back early tomorrow. Try to get some sleep yourself."

After the physician had departed, Doyle looked in on his wife, found her already sleeping. He went back to the front room, tried to interest himself in the day's newspaper. He couldn't. His thoughts vacillated from innate, husbandly concern for Sarah to frank realization such concern was now largely feigned. He kept visualizing Molly Brennan's snapping black eyes and quirking red lips as she dispensed beer and repartee to the patrons of the Cat and Fiddle. Molly had come to town only a month ago, but from the very first week he'd become infatuated, and she had miraculously returned his regard by meeting him clandestinely behind Thompson's Mill.

At ten o'clock Doyle gave up, sought to compose himself for the night on the couch. The endeavor was futile. Censure over his initial thoughts about Sarah's attack (superstitious speculation cloaking a death wish?) engulfed him in waves. Sleep was impossible.

The days immediately following were no better. An examination made with a portable cardiograph he brought to the cottage the next morning convinced Dr. Carmody no extensive heart damage had occurred, and that Sarah would not require hospitalization.

"Complete rest is all she needs for a month, Mr. Doyle," the physician stated. "After that, some buggy rides in the country, a little mild activity, and your wife should be fine. Just be certain she avoids any emotional upsets, any shock or strain."

Doyle knew he should have been delighted with the encouraging prognosis. He also knew he wasn't—and *why* he wasn't—and the clash of conflicting emotions was devastating.

Molly brought the whole smoldering issue to flame one night a week later. The neighbor lass had been staying with Sarah days, getting her meals and tending her wants while Doyle was at work at Jellicoe's farm; and this night he had prevailed upon the girl to remain after supper while he left the cottage "for a bit of a breather." The reprieve

had been sought behind Thompson's Mill, where Molly came into his arms with a ready kiss and a fervent sigh. "I wish she had died," Molly whispered.

Shocked despite himself, Doyle drew back. "Don't say that!"

"Why not?" Molly's red mouth pouted as she pressed close. "It's what you're wishing too, isn't it?"

"No! No, it's not."

"Don't be lying to me, Michael Doyle. I know you too well for that."

"Please, Molly," Doyle implored, sorely shaken now that his soul was being stripped bare. "We mustn't be talking like this. Sarah's my wife."

Molly's lips again brushed his. "And you wish she wasn't," she murmured.

"I—I can't wish such a thing."

Molly disengaged herself, but still stood close, close enough for him to catch the intimate scent of her hair, read the unspoken promise in her lovely dark eyes. "I'm not believing you can't, Michael," Molly told him quietly.

There was the devil's own crux of it all; with this breathtaking creature in his arms, Doyle realized he wasn't believing it either.

The sleepless night which ensued was but a sample of many. Though he contrived to conceal his state from Sarah, Doyle's nerves grew wire-taut; his appetite lagged and his strength ebbed. Conversely, with each succeeding day, Sarah's recovery bloomed apace. The fresh air buggy rides which Dr. Carmody had prescribed, and which Doyle had no legitimate excuse against conducting, put roses in Sarah's cheeks and left small doubt of her imminent return to full health. This realization, when balanced against brief moments of consolation with Molly, left Doyle all the more miserable.

And then one night as he tossed fitfully on the couch, the solution presented itself. Full-blown, complete, the very simplicity stunned Doyle, left his pulse racing. Any misgiving, any subconscious moral dissuasion was swept aside in grim recognition of his own intolerable position and what it would mean to be free to take the delectable Molly as his bride. He could do it; he *had* to do it.

"I can't go on this way," Doyle earnestly told the winsome barmaid when they met the following night.

She studied him, shrewdly sensing a subtle implication in his tone.

"You've thought of something," she suggested, making it a statement rather than a question.

He drew a breath. "I have."

Molly snuggled against him. "Tell me, Michael."

Doyle hesitated, his arms trembling as he returned the embrace. "The doctor cautioned me against Sarah's experiencing any sudden shock or strain," he said finally. "If she *did* get such a shock, a truly severe one—" He stopped, swallowing hard and averting his gaze. Thinking was one thing, but actually putting it into words—

Molly's dark eyes continued to seek his. "You're saying, if we did the shocking?"

Doyle's reply was barely audible. "Yes."

She pulled back slightly. "That would be murder, Michael," she said.

He stiffened, forced himself to look at her. "I don't want to be talking about that," he answered, his voice abruptly taut. "All I know is, it's our best chance." He drew her close once more, sought her lips. "Our only chance, darlin'."

For a long moment Molly responded; then she resolutely broke the kiss with a simple query. "How, Michael?"

Doyle breathed deeply again. "A scare; a sudden terrible fright," he explained. "Sarah believes in spirits; she's deathly afraid of sometime meeting up with a ghost. If I should take her for a buggy ride and we're late getting back; if we should drive past the cemetery outside town just about dusk . . ."

Comprehension danced in Molly's gaze. "And if I was already there, wearing a sheet and hiding behind a tombstone near the road . . ."

Doyle nodded. "Some wild shrieking and swooping should do it," he said solemnly. "Afterward, there'll be no evidence. I'll simply claim Sarah suddenly collapsed again. There's not a soul in town who will be believing otherwise."

Molly abruptly giggled. "Or suspect our grave undertaking."

He frowned at her levity. "Don't be laughing, Molly. At best, it'll not be easy for me."

She sobered. "I know, Michael," she whispered, slipping into his arms anew. "But I'll make it up to you. You'll see."

Once the seed of decision had been planted, Doyle was impatient for its fruition. Behind the mill two nights later, with the weather cool and

pleasant, he told Molly they would make their play the following day.

"Sarah has a sister in Dungannon; she'll be happy to make the trip when I suggest it," he explained. "I've already asked Mr. Jellicoe for the day, and I'll delay our return so it will just be turning dark." He looked earnestly at Molly. "Be certain you time it right, now. Not too soon. Wait until we're almost upon you, so Sarah will be sure to see. Then swoop out with a fierce piercing shriek."

Her lips were soft upon his. "No banshee will ever wail fiercer," she promised.

Sarah was indeed gratified at Doyle's suggestion. An unpretentious woman, she found enjoyment in simple activities and watched her husband hitch the mare to the buggy with obvious pleasure. "It will be good to see Emily again," she agreed.

But if Sarah was pleased by the trip, her sister was even more so. At the hour Doyle had elected for their departure, Emily would not even consider Sarah's leaving. "She'll stay until the weekend," she informed Doyle with firm geniality. "You can drive back for her Sunday."

Sarah's concurrence was characteristically diffident. "A little visit *would* be nice," she suggested.

Some rapid cerebration convinced Doyle to agree reluctantly. Should he obdurately insist upon Sarah's return this day, her sister might very well recall, wonder about it later. While that would be a minor point, and nothing could be proven, still it was better to arouse no speculation, particularly when it meant only a few days' delay until another trip could be undertaken. Further, now that he thought about it, it would do no harm to see how Molly carried it off, how she conducted her ghost act when the buggy approached the cemetery. Sort of a "dry run," you might say.

So Michael Doyle drove home alone.

With a few exceptions, all of Aughnacloy attended the wake and funeral. Molly Brennan was one who didn't. The experience so unnerved her she was forced to take to her bed for a week. She continued to envision that terrible moment when, shrieking and wearing her shroud, she had jumped from behind the tombstone and so spooked Michael Doyle's mare that the frightened animal bolted, throwing Doyle from the buggy to strike a roadside boulder and split open his skull like an eggshell. And all on Friday the thirteenth, no less.

Storm's End

by Michael Zuroy

In a rising sea south of Gloucester, the trawler *Wilma* came upon a small cruiser, pitching, helpless with power gone. Old Cap'n Giles Barlow made out three on board; no reason to connect them right off with the radio story on the upshore payroll robbery.

To his only crew aboard that day, his wife Leah, he said testily, "Fool vacationers, likely. Bound to take 'em off, or they're done." He throttled down the worn, rattling diesel.

"Bother," Leah said. Squat in her oilskins, almost unrecognizable as a woman, she waddled from the bow deckhouse, down the steel companionway. She emerged with a coil of line, made an end fast to a stanchion. The *Wilma* was losing way, plunging down upon the cruiser. Leah braced against the wind and, with a painful effort that seemed to drain her body, tossed the line.

A man seized the line and all hauled. The cruiser came, weltering, pounding against the *Wilma's* hull. Clumsily, the three men scrambled aboard, letting their boat fall away.

Their city raincoats were soaked, small protection against sea weather. Two held tightly to briefcases and Cap'n Giles eyed them suspiciously as they floundered along the deck to the deckhouse.

One, tall and lanky, said sourly, "Thanks." Then realizing that Leah was a woman, he added, "Thanks, ma'am."

Another said, "We could've drowned."

His tone made Cap'n Giles turn his stooped frame from the wheel to peer. Cap'n Giles' face was lined and sagging, but his eyes were sharp blue and he saw the terror of the sea on this husky man. Why would such a man challenge the sea this angry day? He said, "Sorry we couldn't secure your boat in this blow."

"Where's the rest of your crew?" asked the last man. His face was pale, fine-boned.

"Me and the missus is enough today. We ain't trawling."

"Just you two," the man said thoughtfully.

"Makes things simpler, Boyd," the lanky man said.

"That is so right, Andy. It makes me feel good when I see things simple like this."

"Oh, Johnny, Johnny boy," Leah said suddenly, staring at Boyd intently. "You're back from the sea. Oh, my boy, my boy."

Boyd's head twitched and he stepped back, watching her dubiously. "What's with you?"

"That ain't Johnny, pet," Cap'n Giles said, sighing. "Johnny's gone, remember? He ain't comin' back, never. This ain't him."

"Looks like him," the squat woman in oilskins said, her eyes never leaving Boyd. "Looks like Johnny would look, grown up older."

"There's always somebody looks like Johnny. You always think you're seein' Johnny again, but you ain't. Johnny's gone."

"Gone," Leah said. Her face cleared. "'Course this ain't him. I know Johnny's gone. Sure looks like him, though."

"What's this?" Boyd asked.

"Lost our boy, many years ago," Cap'n Giles explained. "She took it awful hard, never got over it. Gets a spell now and then."

"I ought to be a grandmother," Leah said. "I ought to be playing with Johnny's children right now, 'stead of sailing out here on the lonely sea. I got a right to be a grandmother."

"Look, Cap," Boyd said sharply, "where you bound for?"

"A ways south'ard."

"Well, we were headed to a spot down the coast, about three hundred miles. Take us there, will you?"

"Can't."

"We'd pay well."

"Best I can do is put you off along the Cape."

"That's no good to us, old man."

Cap'n Giles said testily, "Ain't my lookout."

Casually, Boyd slid out an automatic pistol. His lips eased away from his teeth. "Now, okay?"

Cap'n Giles' eyes fixed upon the three. Three city men with briefcases who didn't belong on the sea . . . The radio report, Harrington

Machinery Company's payroll looted from an armored car by three men; over sixty thousand dollars stolen, a guard shot and killed . . . It was almost certainty Cap'n Giles now felt about these three. He said, "Leave us be. You don't belong with us."

"Sure we don't, old man. Help us, you'll be rid of us. Give us trouble, we'll blast you both and dump you over. We'll try running this tub ourselves if we have to, but it'd be nicest for all if you help."

Either way, they mean to murder us, Cap'n Giles decided, except they'll wait longer if we help. They'd already murdered; wouldn't stop to leave a couple of old folks to point out their trail. He said, "Radio claims you got better than sixty thousand."

The three glanced quickly at one another; then Boyd grinned. "We did all right. Foxed them too. No roadblocks out here; they never figured we'd take an ocean cruise. Only trouble, the damn boat broke down."

"Maybe it's just as well," the husky one of the three said, the one who had seemed afraid. "It's getting wild out here. At least we got a bigger boat now." He gave a small shudder, blinking out the deck-house window at the spray exploding against the glass. Rain was beating down from a darkened sky and the gale's sad howling was rising. He shuddered again. "Look at all that lousy water waiting for us out there."

"Now, Herman, why don't you just make believe all that stuff is beer?" Andy said. "Wouldn't mind it then, hey? A tough hood like you, what are you scared of?"

"Well, old man?" Boyd said.

Yes, these were the ones, Cap'n Giles told himself. They would murder him and Leah, sure; the free way they were admitting who they were proved that. He said, "All right, I'll run you where you say. Got no choice."

"Smart," Boyd smiled. "Don't try any tricks. I'm no real sailor, but I can still read that compass. Now, you got any java? Any chow?"

"Oh, Johnny boy, you're hungry," Leah said eagerly. "Just wait, mother'll take care of you."

"Tain't Johnny," Cap'n Giles said patiently.

"Looks like Johnny."

"Johnny's dead."

"Yes, so he is. Looks like Johnny, though. Nice-looking man."

"Shut up about Johnny, will you?" Boyd's voice was irritated.

Suddenly, a monster wave rose before them. Herman's mouth dropped open, his eyes bulged. Stricken and paralyzed, he watched it rushing down. The bulk of it curled over the bow, hovered over their heads. Down it slammed. The world outside the windows disappeared in a roaring chaos of foam and spray, in a tilted, sliding mass of water. Forcing in through cracks, water slid across the floor of the deckhouse, sloshed at their feet. The *Wilma* lurched and dropped. When the window cleared, they saw that the deck was buried under water. For a moment, the boat refused to rise, seemed to be sinking deeper; then weakly, weakly, it floated back up, spilling dark green water. Cap'n Giles held on to the wheel with clawed, knowing hands.

An incoherent sound came from Herman. He was spread-eagled against the rear wall of the deckhouse. Boyd and Andy had stood their ground, but both looked wan and shaken.

Under Cap'n Giles' fixed eye, Herman slowly straightened, shamefaced. "Damn ocean," he muttered.

Cap'n Giles began to chuckle; a low chuckle, thin with age, but persistent.

"Shut up," snarled Herman.

Giles went on chuckling.

Herman's hand went to his breast pocket. "I'll plug you. Old wreck, I'll knock off what's left of your moldy carcass."

Cap'n Giles' voice deepened. "Aye, old wreck I am, but I ain't feared of the sea." He chuckled again. "Aye, it crashes, it thunders, it heaves, it don't fool me!" His chuckling changed to a wild, cackling mirth. "Hee, hee, hee!" he laughed, in the teeth of the gale. "Don't fool me a bit."

"He's got rocks in his head too," said Andy hoarsely.

Cap'n Giles' voice deepened again, "That rage, that's a rage of love, a testing, a calling on our strength. Love, aye; can't you feel the love of the sea when it's whispering kindly and brightening and sparkling and cradling all so gentle? Lonely is the sea, wanting us, and could you understand the roaring and murmuring and foamy tears you would know the pity and haven of it. Fount of life, the sea, calling all back. Have you never heard the call? Even from ashore, is there one who has not heard the call of the sea? Close your ears if you will, the sea calls you, it wants you, for peace, for sanctuary."

"Don't tell me the sea wants *me*," Herman said. "I'll plug you."

"Patience," Boyd said.

"I ain't putting up with that creepy talk. I'll plug him."

"That's your big trouble, Herman," Boyd said. "You're short on patience. Maybe you'd like to handle the boat in this storm? Maybe you understand this boat better than the Cap'n? Maybe you'd like to go back to doing our own navigating? Please, a little patience, Herman."

"Oh, Johnny, you're back," Leah said.

Boyd quivered.

"'Tain't Johnny," Cap'n Giles said. "Johnny's dead."

"Yes, he is, isn't he?"

"What a creepy pair," Andy said sourly.

"All right, all right," Boyd said. "Let's settle down the best we can. We got a long way to go. How about that java and chow, old lady?"

They dispersed themselves about the cramped deckhouse, trying painfully to relax, stowing the briefcases carefully on a wall shelf. When Leah brought coffee and sandwiches from below, Andy and Boyd wolfed the food hungrily; Herman did not seem to have much of an appetite, flinching at every watery blow the old craft took, turning paler as they pitched and tossed.

They drove on, into the afternoon. The *Wilma* plunged, strained and creaked. The sea was dark as night under the black, scudding clouds. After some hours, though, there appeared in the distance an edge of light, startlingly bright in the gloom. It moved toward them steadily; then holes appeared in the thick clouds, letting long tunnels of radiance drop from sky to sea. Through an opening, they caught the first sight of the sun, starkly bright and cheerful. The sea was settling into long swells; blue patches were appearing above as the clouds separated.

"Storm over?" Andy asked Cap'n Giles.

"Blown out."

"Good," Herman grunted weakly.

They drove on. Toward the end of the afternoon another vessel was sighted, approaching on an intercepting course.

It was Boyd who presently said in a tight voice, "Coast Guard? Keep down, out of sight, boys. Is it Coast Guard, old man?"

"Aye."

"They mean to stop us?"

"Speak us, likely."

"Then understand this. Give us away and you die, you and the wife. Understand?"

"I understand."

Boyd said, "We mean it. We're already wanted for murder, a couple more won't hurt us. If they get us, we'll shoot you down first. You better believe that. Do you believe it, old man?"

"Aye."

"No tricks. Try to fool us, we'll get you in the end."

The woman said, "No tricks, Giles. You listen to the man. We don't want to be shot."

"No tricks," Cap'n Giles said.

"Watch your tone of voice," Boyd said. "Talk natural. Just your voice gives us away, you die."

"Watch your voice, Giles," the woman said.

"Aye."

The Coast Guarder came up, sleek and powerful, life-size as it neared and turned parallel. Men could be made out on deck. Within the deckhouse of the *Wilma*, the three intruders crouched below window level.

"Ahoy, *Wilma*!" bellowed a figure on the Coast Guarder bridge. "Squall bother you?"

Leah took the wheel. Cap'n Giles leaned out an open window and trumpeted back, "Made out."

"No damage?"

"Thank you, we're all right."

"Seen a capsized cabin cruiser?"

"No, sir. Who would that be?"

"Don't know. Helicopter reported it. We're headin' for its position. Might have been three gunmen."

"How's that?"

"Payroll robbery. Boy sighted three men answering gunmen's description putting out from isolated area in cruiser. It might not be theirs, though. There's a search on. Keep your eyes open, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Or we can put a man aboard you to help the search."

"No, sir. This is a fishin' vessel; ain't a police boat."

The reply came with some asperity, "Suit yourself." The Coast

Guarder forged past with a snarl of engines and a welter of foam, drew rapidly away.

"Hear that?" Herman whispered. "We would've drowned. Lucky we got on this tub."

"Yes, lucky," Boyd said. "Now, let 'em search. Lucky for you too, Daddy, that you played it cool."

"Aye," said Cap'n Giles.

"I knew you wouldn't squeal. You old ones, you're the most scared to die, you want to hold on to the little living you got left. I've seen it before."

"Aye," said Cap'n Giles.

The Coast Guard vessel had disappeared in the murk, and the men rose.

The *Wilma* drove on. The night came on full, dark and cool; the sea rolled gently now, the stars were swarms of bright glitters in velvet. On drove the *Wilma*, bow swishing, taking the slap-slap of the sea, running lights softly shining green and red.

The silence was at last broken by Cap'n Giles. "Sixty thousand dollars," he said, with a kind of wonder. "A sum most men can't save in a lifetime of work, and you took it in a few minutes. A bad thing, but special, I'm bound to admit, and you must be special men."

Boyd looked at him sharply. "So you see that, old man, do you? You're right; it took more brains and guts than most guys can get up. Oh, we planned it, we scheduled it, we blueprinted it."

"Ah," Cap'n Giles said.

"Timing," Boyd went on, pride creeping into his voice. "It took beautiful timing. We staked it out, we practiced it for weeks. We got this little beat-up old pickup truck, see, kind of heap people don't see even when they're looking at it. We cased the job good. We found the armored car stopped at the office entrance between 9:30 and 10, Thursdays, with three guards moving the payroll and more in the locked car, covering."

"Yeah," Herman said. "A tough setup."

"As the money car stops, we come alongside in the pickup as the door swings open, perfect timing. I leap into the armored car, cover the guards; Herman's right with me. One guard's already holding the two canvas bags with the boodle. I order him to throw it out."

"Then I jump from the truck, scoop it up, see," Andy said. "Then

back in the driver's seat, quick like a bunny."

"Meanwhile, I'm in the wagon, picking up the guards' rods," Herman said, "so they won't be shooting after us."

"I see it coming in this joker's eyes before he even makes his try," Boyd said. "This one guard's got to play it noble. He goes for a gun, and I let him have it twice."

"Now, wait a minute," Herman said. "I plugged him too. In fact, I'd say I got him first."

"Maybe," Boyd said.

"I plugged him first," Herman said stubbornly. "Didn't you see him jump?"

"I don't care to argue about it," Boyd said.

"Didn't it bother you, taking life?" Cap'n Giles asked.

They examined him blankly. "Cap," Boyd said, "if a steel worker kills himself falling off a building, that's the risk that goes with the job, isn't it? Same with a guard; got to expect shooting."

"The man may have had a family."

"Anybody's got a family," Herman growled. "Knocked off family men before."

Boyd was watching Cap'n Giles with an odd expression. "The law's made to protect the fat ones, understand, Cap? The law's phony, the rules are phony. How much stealing and killing are covered up, do you think? Grab what you can, don't worry about the other guy, that's the only rule the smart ones follow."

"What, then?" Cap'n Giles asked.

"We gunned the truck, headed down for the shore to this old deserted dock. We dumped the truck off a cliff into about fifty feet of water; might be they'll never find it. Then we changed our clothes, switched the money, took off in the cruiser; a clean getaway to another part of the country, no road blocks. Can't figure luck though—who'd know some kid would come wandering along the shore and spot us just then, or that a storm would come up?"

"I won't complain about luck, Boyd," Andy said. "We're on our way, and our tracks are covered."

"Yeah, we were lucky, in the end," Herman said.

"That's right, we're lucky," Boyd said.

"Aye?" said Cap'n Giles.

The *Wilma* was driving on, forging steadily through the sea. Cap'n

Giles and Leah were now peering through the window. "Oh, Johnny," Leah said.

~ "Told you, shut up about Johnny," Boyd snapped.

"Ain't you she's talking to now," Cap'n Giles said. "We're about here, pet."

"What's that?" Boyd said.

"She's talking to Johnny," Cap'n Giles said. "We're old and sick, and the sea's been calling us to come rest with Johnny. Here it was, the sea took him—yon's the breakers. On that reef we foundered, years ago. We survived, Johnny didn't."

"No!" Boyd yelled, making a lunge for the wheel.

Cap'n Giles let it go. "Nothing can change it now. Sorry you insisted on coming along. It must be that the sea's been calling you too."

With a shock, the *Wilma* struck, began to break and fill.

"But the money!" Andy yelled.

"All our planning!" Boyd said, frenzied.

"No, please, please, no! I'm scared of the sea!" sobbed Herman.

"Now," Leah said serenely, "we're ready to die. Coming, Johnny."



The Picnic People

by Edward D. Hoch

The car radio thundering a Sunday afternoon concert into my ear, the sun bleaching out my hair exposed in the topless auto, I wheeled briskly up the familiar park road searching for them. They always came to the same general area, the same hilltop with its vagrant view of distant beach and specks of suited swimmers, just far enough away to untempt husbands with roving eyes and satisfy wives with children to guard. Today, breeze blowing off the lake, rustling leaves at their summer peakness, was surely a day when the picnic people would be out. All of them.

I spied Fred Dutton's car first, parked with three wheels off the road, sporty and casual like its owner, top up and windows cautiously closed, also like its owner. Surely he could have reached it before any of the less than occasional overhead clouds grouped into a threat of rain, but Fred Dutton was like that. Take no chances. Play it safe. Better safe than sorry. Fred Dutton.

I parked behind him, purposely kissing his bumper a bit harder than necessary, enjoying myself at the thought of the dent I might be leaving in it. Almost I expected him to come running at the sound, but they were just out of sight, down the hill hidden by the willows along the edge of the pond. It was a pleasant place, bringing back half-forgotten memories of days without care and nights when only the happiness mattered. I'd been the one in those days, and I wondered if I still was.

Dora, Fred's wife, saw me first. She was boiling water on the camp stove for her usual cup of tea and she jerked her hand back with such sudden shock that the pan of water clattered to the ground. "Why—Sam!"

"Hello, Dora. Glad to see you remember me." The grass seemed

suddenly damp through my shoes, and I was vaguely aware that the children had been splashing here.

"Sam!" She turned her head. "Fred, come here! It's Sam—Sam Waggel." Her voice almost broke as she said it.

Fred came running, and the rest—except for the children—weren't far behind. They came cautiously at first, as if viewing a beast newly escaped from the zoo. Then they crowded around, the foolish false grins on their faces, greeting me. "Sam boy, how the heck you been?" This was a real estate broker named Charlie Thames, who'd never really liked me on my best of days. Charlie hadn't changed much, put on a few pounds maybe, but hadn't we all. His wife Laura startled me a bit with her graying hair, but the rest of them were pretty much the same.

Fred Dutton had his arm around my shoulder almost at once, as if I'd never been away, pressing a sweating can of beer into my hand. "When'd you get out, Sam? Why didn't you let us know? How you feelin'?"

"Well enough, Fred," I said, answering his last question first. "I got out a couple days ago. Called your and Charlie's homes but when nobody answered I figured you were probably out picnicking at the old place."

"Hello, Sam." This was Jean O'Brian—Jean Falconi now, of course—a girl who'd meant a lot to me once. She was wearing white shorts that showed off her legs. She's always had the best legs in the crowd. Her husband, Joe, came into view then too, carrying the youngest of the children in his arms.

"Hi, Jean. Joe. The kids are really growing up."

"Have a hot dog, Sam," Charlie offered. "We got plenty."

Laura, as if to back up the words, went to get one off the grill. "Here, Sam. Just the way you used to like them."

"Used to, Laura? I still do. Nothing's changed that much."

She flushed slightly and turned away, but Dora Dutton was there to take her place. "Do you want to talk about it, Sam? We don't want . . ."

"Sure. What do you want to know? If you've finished eating I can give you some wonderful descriptions of the shock treatments and the aftereffects of the drugs they were feeding me."

"Go play," Charlie said to one of the children who wandered up.

"Go play with your sister." His face was hard and set. Already he was remembering his old Sam-hatred from the days before the trouble.

"Sam," Joe Falconi said, speaking with that sort of almost-accent, "what about the charges? Are you going to have to stand trial now that you're out?" Joe was a contractor, a good guy as guys went.

"No," I told them, taking my time about lighting a cigarette, letting all damned six of them know I was out for good, here to stay, ready for action. "Remember, the court ruled I was insane at the time I did it. But I'm all right now, all cured. All."

"Well," Fred Dutton said, "well, that's damned good. All cured, huh?"

"All cured."

But Jean wasn't quite so convinced. "It's only been two years, Sam. Are you sure? I mean . . ."

I just sort of laughed at her. She did look funny standing there under the willow, thinking about how this guy she once "necked" with over in West Park might now be a homicidal maniac and what the hell was he doing walking around loose just two years after it happened.

Charlie and Laura sort of drifted off, pretending to hike after the kids, and Dora started the water for her tea again. After all the excitement of my arrival they were acting now as if I'd never been away. Or were they acting as if I'd never come back?

Joe Falconi brought me a beer to go with the hot dog. "It's good to see you again, boy. Come on, let's walk down by the water."

We strolled away from the others, kicking at stones, watching them skip and finally splash in the sparkling pond, stirring here and there an eddy of mud in the tranquil waters. "Your kids are growing," I said. "You and Jean just have the two?"

"No," he answered, a bit embarrassed. "We had another boy last year. I guess you didn't hear."

"Communications weren't too good in there. Especially when none of my old friends ever came to see me."

"Sam . . ."

"What?" I kicked at a loose stone.

"Sam, I don't blame you for being a bit bitter, but you've got to look at it from our point of view."

"Sure," I told him with a smile. "You figured I was locked up in the nut house for the rest of my natural life, so why the hell should any-

body bother about me. Right? It was just as if I was dead too, along with her."

"Sam. You don't know what you do to me when you talk like that. Hell, they wouldn't even let anyone see you at first, you know that. We didn't know how bad you were or anything about it. You know the way the newspapers treat a story like that."

"Sure. Frankly, I was surprised they didn't have a gang of reporters waiting for me the other day."

"Look, Sam . . . I know the construction business isn't your line, but if you need a job to tide you over for a while, I could probably fix you up."

"Thanks, Joe. About the only thing I've done for the past two years is make baskets. They have some weird ideas of mental therapy in those places. Maybe I'll take you up on it."

From somewhere behind us we heard Jean calling to him. "I have to get back. She has quite a time with those kids."

I followed him part of the way, but paused a bit by one of the playing children. It was a little girl, unmistakably one of Charlie and Laura's children. "How are you?" I asked her.

"Fine," she answered a bit uncertainly at the question from a stranger.

"You don't remember me. You were just born when I went away." I pulled at a few willow leaves and tickled her nose with them. "What's your name? I forgot it."

But before the child could answer, Laura Thames had appeared from somewhere. "Sam, please leave Katie alone."

"What?" I hadn't quite understood her unexpected words.

"I'm sorry, Sam. Really I am. But I don't want you to get near the children."

"Sure." I stood up and walked back to where the others stood too casually around the charcoal stove. Dora was drinking her tea, while Fred played with a rumpiled deck of cards.

"Sam," Charlie Thames said, "what do you plan to do with yourself? Plan to stay around town long?"

"Why not? It's my home." I was conscious of the sun a bit lower in the afternoon sky, the birds not quite as chirping as before.

"Sure. I was just thinking that you might want to go away to some place where people didn't know about the . . . trouble. You know."

Charlie was smiling. Keeping it friendly. The smiler with the knife. Chaucer. Charlie Damned Chaucer Thames.

"Thanks for the advice, Charlie."

"New York or someplace. You know, big city. Hell, I was reading the other day that most of the people in Manhattan are nuts anyway."

"Charlie!" This from Laura, warning, rebuking. Charlie glanced at her and heeded the warning. He shut up suddenly and walked over to inspect the dying embers of the charcoal fire.

"Guess I'd better be going," I told them, all of them, not one in particular, because all of them thought alike. Even good old Joe with his offers of a job until I could find something better. Maybe they thought I was going to work on their wives next. Maybe they thought their children weren't safe around a homicidal maniac—even a certified cured homicidal maniac. Maybe, hell.

"It looks a little like rain," Jean was agreeing. "Maybe we'd all better start packing up." I followed her gaze toward the single small black cloud moving fast in the eastern sky and almost laughed in her pretty face. They were all damned scared of old Sam.

I walked vaguely back in the direction of the cars, knowing, feeling that six pairs of eyes were boring holes in my back. "So long," I called out, half turning toward them for a final wave. It hadn't been much of a visit, not much of a one at all.

Fred Dutton ran after me and caught me at the top of the hill. "Sam, look, come over to the house some night, huh?"

"Sure, Fred."

"Don't be bitter."

"I'm not. Guess I just thought everything would be the same, like the old days."

Fred Dutton looked suddenly solemn. "There were eight of us in the old days, Sam. There aren't any more. It can't ever be the same, I guess. You gotta understand that."

"Sure. I'll call you, Fred."

"Do that."

I went on down the hill and opened my car door. I guess I would have gone on home after all if I hadn't seen the kid again just then. Katie Thames, in her red shorts and striped shirt, wandering over the top of the hill. She must have been almost three. I could remember the night she was born, when things were so much better.

"Katie, Katie girl!" I called softly. "Come here, doll."

She came, a bit uncertainly, but remembering me now from our meeting of only moments before. "Hello," she said.

"Come on, Katie, let's run down by the water and play. Let's sneak down real quiet, so mommy and daddy don't hear us." Yes, before I left, before I went out of their lives for good, I'd give them something to remember me by—especially Charlie and Laura.

We made our way through the underbrush and came out suddenly near the point where Joe and I had been walking. I led her around to the other side of the pond, though, until I was sure we would be in view of the picnic people—in view but out of touch. Let them scream and carry on then, damn them. Let them tell me to leave their precious kids alone.

"Here, Katie. We'll play a little game. Up here." I motioned her up on a rock, and watched her running with all the vigor and anticipation of a two-year-old. The rock jutted out a bit over the still, mirrored surface of the pond, and I knew from the old days that the kids often used it as a sort of diving-board for illegal swimming.

Now, my breath coming faster, I waited until she was within reach of my hands. Then I grabbed her up, suddenly, before she could give more than a little grasp. I held her by her tiny ankles and dangled her from the rock, upside down over the stagnant waiting waters.

"Scream now!" I told her. "Scream your head off! I'm going to drop you." And I lowered her a few inches toward the water.

She screamed, a high tiny sound that barely managed to drive the birds from the nearest trees. And I wondered if they would hear. I wondered if they would come running to rescue her. I wondered if I would really let her tiny body drop into the water, perhaps just too soon to be rescued. She was not like the other one, not at all like the other one. She was too helpless, even for the killing, too small for anything like picnics. She needed to grow up, just as cattle must be fattened for market, needed to live.

"Scream! Louder!"

"Sam! You crazy fool!"

It was Joe Falconi in the lead, splashing across the very middle of the shallow pond. Joe Falconi, up to his chest in the dirty water. And Laura, screaming in terror. Charlie, running toward me as he shouted a string of curses. Fred and Dora and Jean. Beautiful Jean. All hor-

rified. Six horrified humans. Let her fall. Let her fall now. Give them a scare.

But already Joe was beneath me, smashing the reflecting surface of the pool, holding out his arms to catch her. Already Charlie and Fred were grappling with me, pulling me back from the edge.

"Somebody call the police!"

"Hold him down! Hold him!"

"He's cracked up—really crazy."

And Laura, screaming, "God, he would have killed her! He wanted to kill her!"

I didn't struggle. I looked up into the fearful eyes of Charlie Thames, sitting on my chest, holding me down. O.K., Charlie, but I gave you a scare, didn't I? Didn't I?

And above me the trees whispered in the wind, the clouds . . . what did the clouds do . . . ?



The Shunned House

by Robert Edmond Alter

The abandoned Yost house has stood in shunned isolation for nearly two hundred years. Like some dead thing left over from the Silurian ending and waiting abjectly for eternity, it stands deep in the tanglewoods not far from Oneida Lake.

Local superstition has always claimed that it is haunted, but some of our more modern waggish minds refer to it as a "sick house". One way or the other, hardly anyone ever goes near it, children live in dread of it, and Hon Schuyler has repeatedly said that even the foxes and rabbits shun its vicinity.

Built by Hans Yost in 1768, it followed the popular colonial lines—the enormous peaked roof with two stories and dormerless attic, the usual Georgian doorway and Ionic pilasters. Yost and his family enjoyed their sturdy home for seven years; then, when the Revolutionary War began, they fled to Albany to escape the Indian raids. They never returned.

Two years later when Sillinger led Burgoyne's right wing in a flank attack against the Mohawk Valley, his quartermaster appropriated the deserted mansion for a supply dump. And that was what gave rise to the legend of Sillinger's Gold.

Benedict Arnold routed the British commander and his army with a classic stratagem and sent them packing in a panic. They departed in such an hysteria of haste that they left the quartermaster and his men behind, and that night a gang of drunken Continentals and their Seneca allies surrounded the Yost house and proceeded to massacre the handful of Britons.

It was a very sorry affair. The British were unarmed and tried to surrender, but the savages wanted scalps and the Continentals were too

drunk to care. You listen to the old wives' tales around these parts and you'll begin to believe that on certain nights when the wind moans from the northwest you can still hear the piteous cries of Sillinger's quartermaster and his men wailing for mercy in the lonely woods.

But old wives or not, the legend of Sillinger's Gold was based on a foundation of fairly firm facts. Everyone knew that a British army in those days traveled on sterling which was entrusted to the quartermaster's keeping. Obviously neither he nor any of his men had escaped with the cash, and the Continentals and Indians who had massacred them and commandeered their supplies had uncovered no evidence of it; so what had become of Sillinger's Gold?

"It is still there," said the old wives and the old men and the young children. "Still out there in the woods in the old Yost house, guarded by the ghosts of Sillinger's murdered men. Listen! Hear it? Hear their cries in the wind?"

When I was a young boy there were times, at night, I swore I could hear their cries. And once, when I was eleven, I was certain that I heard more than a ghostly cry. I was positive I had heard the crunching chop of a tomahawk. That was the day I entered the forbidding old mansion for the first time.

My best pal Joe Turpin and his sister Gert and I had gone fishing in the creek along Yost woods; but they weren't biting that day and we didn't know what to do with ourselves until Joe made the foolish suggestion, "Let's go take a peek at that old Yost house."

"Well . . ." I said doubtfully.

Gert slapped a hand to her mouth and looked big-eyed at us. "Oh, we don't dare!" she said in a stacy whisper.

It must have been her presence that prompted me. She was ten, had honey-colored hair and a pug-nose, and I thought she was beautiful. Joe thought she was a pain so I never told him how I felt about her. I wasn't actually sure just what I felt, but I was downright convinced that I had to show off in front of her.

"Why not?" I said. "I don't give a hoot about those old ghosts."

So we went. I led the way into the tanglewood, all thicketty with witch hobble and devilclub and grotesque oaks, thinking I must look something like the fearless Henry Stanley when he set out to find Dr. Livingstone in the wilds of Africa.

Suddenly we caught our first glimpse of the stark house through the

interlacing of gnarled old trees. Tall grass and weirdly misshapen weeds grew in the long neglected yard, and all at once the morbid strangeness of this sinister vegetation and the eldritch atmosphere of the dilapidated house struck all three of us like a slap and we stopped dead in our tracks.

"What're you stopping for?" Joe asked me nervously.

"What're you?"

"Well, the old windows are all boarded up. We can't get in."

I was secretly relieved, but I felt I had to give Gert further evidence of my daring. I said, "Well, that old cellar there is open. C'mon, let's look."

The storm doors on the cellar stairs had long since fallen in, and we stood in the weedy yard and stared down into the quiet black pit.

"Betcha a dime you don't dare go down there alone," Joe said.

I didn't have a dime to bet and I didn't want one that badly, but Gert was still goggle-eyeing me and whispering, "Oooh, don't, Phil! You dasn't." So I had to.

"You're on," I muttered, and I started down the old mossy stone steps with my fists clenched and with my heart booming in my ears.

It was a vast cobwebby place, lighted only by the small broken panes of windows that peered in from the upper ground level, and filled with a massed wreckage of decaying chests, stave-sprung kegs and things like spinning wheels that twenty decades of deposit had shrouded and festooned into monstrous shapes.

The cool still air had a dank noxious odor, and ghastly-looking pale fungus growths were in the hard earth floor. Hundreds of them had rotted and turned slightly phosphorescent, and they glowed like witch fire, while all around them on the damp dark earth was a cloudy whitish pattern of mold.

I was only there a moment, only long enough to take a fearful look around. Then I heard something go *t-chok*.

It was a small echoing sound and it seemed to come out of a hollow distance, out of that awful clammy earth. A moment later it went *t-chok* again, and all I could think of was those long-ago tomahawks splitting the skulls of Sillinger's screaming men.

Then I was long gone too, back up the squelchy steps and through the opening and into the bright fresh day, past my two gawk-faced friends and running, running fit to bust a lung, straight for the woods,

with Joe and Gert right after me, Joe yelling and Gert emitting little gaspy shrieks and me shouting back at them.

"I heard 'em! I heard 'em tommyhawking each other!"

We didn't stop running till we reached the creek, where we threw ourselves on the pebbly shore and lay there to let our wind catch up to our bodies. About then a gun went *plamm* somewhere downstream.

"Must be Hon Schuyler," Joe gasped.

It was. He came tramping along in a couple of minutes, with his gun over his shoulder and a dead rabbit tied to his belt. Hon was about twenty-four at that time, a rangy, tanned, energetic cuss who wasn't very book-bright because he had never gone in much for schooling. But he was a wizard in the woods, and would have made a fine Indian scout had there still been a use for such an anachronism.

"Was that you kids I hearn yelling in the woods?" he asked, grinning at us. "You flushed this hare right acrost my path."

"Phil saw the ghosts in the Yost house, Hon!" Gert told him.

"I didn't say I saw 'em," I said. "But I heard something."

Hon told us to wait there, and he went into the woods toward the Yost house. He was back in about twenty minutes and said that all he had seen or heard were rats.

"You kids better stay away from that old dump," he admonished us. "Most of those old timbers and boards are so rotten they're like to fall in at any minute. I know your dad would sure light up if he heard you was fooling around there, Phil."

That was the truth. My dad was the sheriff, and he often said the county ought to tear down the Yost house before some kid broke his fool neck playing there.

"I don't aim to tell him," I said, "if nobody else does."

Hon grinned at me. "Okay. Let's just keep it a secret among the four of us. But after this, find a safer place to play."

Joe and I didn't return to the Yost house until we were fifteen, and we wouldn't have gone then if it hadn't been for Harold Edmonds.

He was a new boy who had moved from New York City and he thought he was something special. Joe and I didn't like him much. He was always putting on airs about what a grand place the city was and sort of making us feel like a couple of country bumpkins.

So one day we said to him, "Yeah, but you don't have a two-hundred-year-old haunted house in the city."

That interested him and he wanted to know all about it, so we told him the story of the massacre and Sillinger's lost gold. Harold scoffed and said it was just a granny tale to frighten little kids. He said to me, "You don't really believe you heard a tomahawk, do you? I mean, *really*?"

"Well," I said defensively, "I don't know what it was I heard. All I know is I heard *something* and it was somewhere in that cellar. You're so darn brave, whyn't you go in there and look for yourself?"

"Sure. I'm willing. But you'll have to show me where it is, if you've got the guts."

Well, we had to go back then because he had called us on it. We led him through the woods and across that weirdly vegetated yard and up to the pitlike cellar, and said, "Down there."

Harold kicked a loose pebble down the cellar steps and grinned.

"You two gonna come with me, or stay up here and hold hands?"

I didn't look at Joe, but I suppose he must have felt the same way I did. I would be doubly darned if I'd let that smart city boy put me down. I shouldered by him and led the way without a word.

It was still the same dank, humid cellar with the repulsive fungi growing out of the dirt floor; yet somehow its nameless air of desolation didn't seem as sinister to me as it had the first time I was there. There is a big difference in your mental approach to any situation between being eleven and being fifteen. Having two people with me made a difference too.

Joe showed a botanical interest in the fungus growths, which he called "corpse weeds." Harold wandered off into the darker recesses of the huge cellar on an inspection tour of his own. I had a half-believing mind on Sillinger's Gold, so I waded into the wreckage of chests and barrels and broken-legged furniture, and gingerly pawed through moldy clots of old rotted clothes and other clammy shapeless things which long ago must have been discarded to the cellar by the Yost family.

I had burrowed down to an old decaying chest which had some letters engraved on its side, and had rubbed off enough of the grime with the heel of my hand to read *St. Leg*—when Harold called out.

"Hey you guys, look here! There's a secret passage behind these shelves."

Joe and I went down to the north end of the cellar where Harold

was standing with a lighted kitchen match. A tall case leaned wearily away from the cobble wall, and just behind it was a narrow five-foot-high opening. The fluttering match flame showed us earthen walls ribbed with thick oak studs and timber beams.

"Must be the escape tunnel," Joe said.

"What's that?" Harold asked.

"Don't you know anything? Folks used to build 'em under their houses years ago in case of an Indian attack. If they couldn't fight off the redskins from the house, then they'd use their escape tunnel and come out somewhere in the woods behind the Indians and get off with their scalps."

"I wonder where this one goes?" Harold said, peering into the dark claustrophobia-breeding tunnel. "What say we follow it? I've got plenty of matches."

Joe and I didn't know where the spooky hole in the wall went, and we didn't want to know. According to legend, a few of the quartermaster's men had tried to flee through the tunnel on the night of the massacre, but the Continentals who had surrounded the house were local boys who knew about the secret passage, and some of them had been waiting in the woods at its issue. They had driven the redcoats back into the tunnel with their bayonets, back into the tomahawks of the drunken howling Indians.

"Uh-huh," I said. "Most of these old tunnels aren't safe. The timbers are all rotten and liable to cave in."

Harold grinned that infuriating grin of his at me. "No guts, huh? You two would make a fine pair of girls."

"Go ahead, big man," I snapped at him. "Let's see you go through it."

"Think I won't? Watch me."

We watched him edge around the sagging old case, bend down and enter the crowding tunnel, the match in his hand casting a spastic orange light on the crumbling dirt walls. The light drew away from us, growing smaller, smaller, and then it was gone.

Joe and I fooled around in the cellar for another twenty minutes waiting for him to come back, but he didn't, so we decided to leave.

"That big city jerk probably thinks he's pulling a fast one on us," Joe said. "He's probably hiding in the woods to see if he can scare us. Let's get out of here."

I was ready. The dust and cobwebs were beginning to give me an unhealthy feeling. I had the sensation that my clothes and skin were turning clammy and that I was wholly unclean.

We went outside and started beating the bush for Harold, tramping through the woods, searching, calling his name, for three hours. By then dusk was hurrying through the trees, and we turned toward home. Joe kept insisting that Harold had played a trick on us, that he was at home that very moment laughing at us, knowing we would be running around in circles in the woods looking for him.

I wasn't so sure. I had the morbid feeling of something gone wrong, and I didn't quite know what to do about it. I phoned Harold's parents as soon as I reached home. They were already in a state of anxiety so I had to tell them what had happened. I didn't tell them we had last seen Harold in the Yost house; I just implied that we had lost track of him in the woods.

My father organized a search party that night, and a whole raft of men and teenage boys began to scour the woods with lanterns and flashlights. I went along with them. Hon Schuyler was one of us, of course, because he knew those woods coming and going; around nine o'clock I had a chance to speak to him alone, and I told him about Harold going into the escape tunnel.

Hon growled, "Ain't you kids been warned again and again to stay clear of that old house?"

"I know, Hon, but he insisted. You think he might have been caught in a cave-in?"

"Could be, but no sense in getting the rest of 'em riled up about it till we know for sure. I'll slip off and give a look."

The next day was a school day, and the men sent all us teenage boys packing for home at midnight. That was when I saw Hon again. He took me aside and told me he had been through the tunnel but hadn't found Harold.

"He come out into the woods all right," Hon said, "because I seen his footprints just inside the exit. But I lost 'em in the leaves. Anyhow, if I was you and Joe, I'd keep it under my hat about you boys going into the Yost house. You'll just get in Dutch with your old man if he learns."

"Sure," I said. "Joe and me won't say anything."

They found Harold Edmonds the next day. I mean they found his

body. It was in the river and he had been drowned. There was a bump on the top of Harold's head, but the coroner figured it was probably caused by a tree stump or a boulder in the water.

The decade that followed Harold Edmonds' death went by like the wind for me. I went away to college when I was eighteen, and after that I served my hitch in the army. I had just turned twenty-five when I finally returned home.

My dad was after me to get into the county district attorney's office to start some kind of political career for myself. Though I really didn't want the job, I decided to take it for a while because it would give me an opportunity to make certain contacts and to understand better the rather ambiguously defined legal aspects governing a certain private enterprise I had in mind.

I had been acting as the DA's man for almost a year when a second tragedy occurred in our town. My boyhood chum, Joe Turpin, was murdered.

Some kids found the body on the bank of the creek bordering the Yost woods. There was no doubt in our minds that it was murder, for Joe's throat had been sliced wide open and the wound had half decapitated him.

"Not a knife slash," the coroner said. "It was made by a broad-bladed instrument, and the blow was delivered in a straight thrust. Could have been an ax, or even a shovel."

I went to see Joe's sister, Gert. She had married a local man and Joe, who hadn't gotten around to marriage himself, had been renting a room from them.

"Did Joe have any enemies you know of, Gert?"

"No, certainly not. Everyone around here had always liked Joe. You know that, Phil."

"Well, do you have any idea why he went into the woods yesterday? Was he going hunting or fishing or what?"

Grace looked down at her folded hands in her lap and shivered.

"It sounds awful when I think of it now; Joe told me he thought he would take a hike in the Yost woods and, just kidding, I said to him, 'Better not go near the Yost house or the tomahawks will get you.' He laughed and said he just might look in there and see if he could find Sillinger's Gold."

She put a fist to her mouth and held it there, then started to cry softly, and I put my arm around her.

"And then," she sobbed, "and then that terrible thing happened to him, to his . . . just as if it really was . . ."

"All right, Gert," I said gently. "Try not to think about it now. Just leave it up to us. We'll get to the bottom of it."

I had an idea that I was already very close to the bottom of it. I went back to the office, got a .38 revolver, put it and a flashlight into my pockets, and set off for the Yost house.

Nothing about the old house seemed to have changed. The weather-beaten front door with its broken fanlight and wormy pediment was still standing, still tightly guarding its old guilty secrets. I plowed through the weeds and went down the cellar steps.

Splashing the flashlight over the moldy earthen floor, I went around the rotting remains of barrels, chests, and other ruined furniture, and followed the dripping stones of the north wall down to the decrepit case that guarded the tunnel. I paused at the burrowlike opening of the escape tunnel, listening.

T-chok . . . t-chok . . .

He was in there digging, as he had been for years. I smiled when I thought of all the countless hours he had spent looking for something that wasn't there. I squeezed behind the shelves, crouched down and started into the tunnel, moving ahead blindly and cautiously, seldom flashing my light for fear he might see it.

It was a horrific place. I felt like a mole burrowing into the infinitely abysmal earth. The quick shooting flickers I made with my flashlight shone eerily along the tunnel of caked loam that stretched and curved ahead, and showed me shallow pocky holes all along the mildew-tainted hard earth floor where he had been digging.

A sudden bright glow illuminated one of the convolutions of the tunnel directly ahead of me. I stuffed my flashlight into my pocket and drew the .38, then moved up a few feet and peered around the turn in the tunnel.

A lantern was blazing on the ground, and Hon Schuyler was hunkering over it, digging at the dirt with a short-hafted shovel. I stepped into the light.

"I had a hunch it was you all along, Hon," I said.

His head shot up and he nearly clobbered himself on one of the low

crossbeams. The up-flood of lantern light cast a demonic glow over his tense wild-eyed face as he crouched in front of me, holding his shovel like a rifle at port arms. He licked his lips before he spoke.

"Too bad you had to butt into this, Phil."

"You mean because now you'll have to fix me like you did Harold Edmonds and Joe? How come you didn't try to make Joe's death look like an accident too?"

Hon grinned. "Because Joe wasn't as easy to handle as the Edmonds kid." He gave the shovel a significant heft. "I had to use this on Joe. I didn't want to, but what else could I do? He heard me digging in here and caught me at it. I've spent too many years looking for Sillinger's Gold to share it with anybody, Phil. And I'm close to it now, hear? I know I am."

"No," I said, "you're not."

"Whatta you mean, I'm not! It's got to be in this tunnel. I've ransacked through the rest of the house dozens of times and I know it ain't there. The quartermaster's men came through here the night of the massacre, didn't they? But when they seen they couldn't get out they must've buried the gold here somewhere."

"No, Hon. It's gone. It's been gone for years."

His eyes went a little crazy. "You're lying! You're trying to trick me! You want it for yourself!"

I opened my mouth to tell him, but he never gave me the chance. He took a sudden vicious broad-stroke with his shovel at the .38 in my hand. I sprang back, banging my spine and head shockingly on a stud and beam, and didn't even have a chance to raise the gun as he came bounding toward me with that damned square-bladed shovel leveled for a slicing thrust at my throat. I simply fired point-blank from the hip.

The .38 made an explosion that must have echoed all through the bowels of the earth, and I cringed, expecting the tunnel to cave in. Crumbling dirt rained on my bowed back, but the old timbers held, and when the smoke cleared I saw Hon on his back with his head by the lantern. He didn't seem to realize he had been shot.

"It—it is here. I know it is," he gasped. "Once I—I even found a couple of old sovereigns right here in the tunnel."

I crouched beside him. His eyes had a queer glassy look.

"They probably dropped out of Sillinger's chest when I started to lug

it through here ten years ago, Hon. It was all decayed and coming apart. I was afraid you might be hanging around outside, so I intended to use the tunnel to get into the woods; but I didn't have the nerve then to go all the way through. I finally took a chance and hauled it up to the yard."

Hon was trying to see me but his eyes kept going out of focus.

"You—you—"

"Yes. I've had the gold hidden in the woods ever since I was fifteen. I couldn't decide what to do with it because the treasure trove laws are so vague I was afraid I might have to forfeit half of it to the state. But a couple of months ago I found a man who will take it off my hands at a fair price, and no questions asked."

"Lying—you're lying!"

"It's the truth, Hon. I found it in the cellar the day you killed the Edmonds boy. Joe didn't notice it, so I kept my mouth shut and came back for it the next day while everybody was looking for young Edmonds. It had been right there in the cellar ever since 1777, shoved in amidst that heap of junk. It even had his name on it."

"No!" Hon's voice croaked. "I—I pawed through all that junk years ago. There wasn't any chest with Sillinger's name. Just old clothes and—"

"You should have gone to school longer, Hon. We learned in the eighth grade that 'Sillinger' is only a local contraction of his proper name: Barry St. Leger."

But the information came too late for Hon. He no longer had a care in this world.



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| Raleigh 100's | 17 | 1.2 | Raleigh | 16 | 1.1 |
| Chesterfield 100's | 18 | 1.1 | Tareyton | 17 | 1.2 |
| Viceroy 100's | 18 | 1.3 | Marlboro | 17 | 1.0 |
| Kool 100's | 18 | 1.3 | Kool | 17 | 1.3 |
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Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined
That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

The Welcome Mat

by Carl Marcus

The autumn darkness came quickly that night, creeping over the freshly-plowed fields like a black fog and clogging the state highway that ribboned past the farmhouse.

Into the driveway drifted a clot of blackness which soon took the shape of a man, huge in size and features, but moving as quietly as a shadow. He paused near the house while his glance studied the small light burning above the front door. There were other lights showing behind the curtained windows. Finally he swung his head slowly from side to side, as though debating whether to try the front or the back entrance.

Now he strode out silently, and as he neared the front door he could hear a man's voice within. When he stopped in the yellow illumination of the tiny bulb and listened intently, he recognized the voice of a newscaster, either on radio or TV.

"... And police are intensifying their efforts to locate the patient who escaped from the Graham State Hospital this afternoon, after killing one of the staff. Again we've been asked to repeat an earlier warning: although appearing harmless, the escapee is capable of becoming extremely dangerous when aroused . . . More details on this story, and an eye-witness account of an attractive blonde in a bizarre filling station holdup, immediately after this important message . . ."

He waited until the commercial had begun before he knocked. Immediately the animated jingle was cut off. Now there was only the stir of light footsteps within the house, then silence.

Although he knew that the screen door was unlatched when he had rapped on it, he saw that the inner wooden door was closed. He assumed that a preliminary inspection of him was now being made

through the peephole. Nonchalantly he glanced about, then down at his feet. He saw the blue door mat with THE FIELDS printed on it in white block letters.

No one answered the door, and when he'd waited the proper interval he rapped again patiently.

"Hello," he said. "It's Gorgon. Bart Gorgon. Bellamy's new hired man. He sent me down the road to borrow some tools."

Again he heard the sound of light footsteps, and a moment later the inner door opened. A small woman with dark hair peered out at him.

"Mrs. Fields?" he asked through the screen.

"What was it you wanted?"

"I'm sorry to bother you on a night like this. I'm Bart Gorgon. Bellamy's new hired man. He sent me over to borrow your husband's set of tools. The one with all the socket wrenches. Bellamy said your husband would know which set."

He saw Mrs. Fields frown as she pushed a lock of hair away from her cheek. "Well, I don't know—"

"I don't blame you for being suspicious, not having met me before. I just went to work for Bellamy today. But if you'll let me talk to your husband, he'll know about the tools. Bellamy set it all up with him."

"My husband—he's not here right now," Mrs. Fields said.

Gorgon rubbed his chin. "Well, maybe I can wait around until he gets back. Bellamy took his wife and kids into town to see a movie. That's why he sent me over. He wanted to be sure and have the tools first thing in the morning." Gorgon nodded solemnly. "I'd better wait around for your husband. Do you expect him soon?"

"No!" Mrs. Fields said quickly. Then she smiled. "What I mean is, I'd rather you came back in the morning. My husband will be home then." She started to close the door.

"Mrs. Fields, could I bother you for a glass of water before I go? That walk from Bellamy's place was a bit farther than I thought."

"Of course. I'll get it for you."

The moment she'd gone Gorgon slipped noiselessly inside and moved just as quietly through the front room. He was standing in the kitchen doorway when she turned away from the sink with the glass of water.

Fright widened her eyes and a bit of the water leaped out of the glass. Angrily she said, "Nobody asked you into this house!"

"Please don't get sore, Mrs. Fields. I don't intend to do you any harm."

"You scare a person to death, sneaking up behind them like that."

"I know." Gorgon nodded, while a smile tried to brighten his ugly face. "I know what you're trying to say. I'm big and ugly and not very smart. You can go ahead and say it because I've heard it all before. Lots of times."

"I didn't mean it that way, Mr. Gorgon, really I didn't. And I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking about your—the way you look. Here's your water. And then leave. Please."

He drank quickly, emptying the tumbler as though it were a shot glass. Her hand came out to take the glass, but he didn't give it to her.

"You know," he said, "you shouldn't be here all alone on a night like this—"

"I'll be all right. Now if you'll just leave—"

"—especially when I heard them announcing how that patient slipped out of Graham today. That's not too far from here and he could have traveled that stretch by now. And they get awfully mean at times. You just can't tell what they might do, finding a person all alone."

"I believe I can take care of myself, thank you. Now if you'll just leave me and let me lock all the doors, I'll manage fine."

Gorgon frowned and shook his massive head. "You don't understand at all, Mrs. Fields. Doors and windows don't stop them when they make up their minds to get something, or go somewhere. Why, they can get into and out of places as easy as monkeys, and when they get worked up they've got the strength of a bull, and they can break, and tear, and kill. And yet they're no different in looks than you or me. Most people don't know that. Why, you could see one walking down the street, coming right towards you, and you wouldn't think anything about it."

Gorgon tried to reassure her with a grin. "What I'm trying to tell you is that the one that got out of Graham today could come right up to your door, and you'd probably let him into the house because he wouldn't look mean or wild-eyed. You'd probably think it was just somebody wanting help with a car that broke down, or wanting to use your phone, or any simple excuse like that. You wouldn't suspect a thing. And then with your husband gone and all, he could turn on you, and you might get killed. They're so unpredictable."

Mrs. Fields' face had become colorless while she stared up at him. Finally she said, "You seem to know a lot about those—about those people at Graham."

"I was there two years."

Mrs. Fields stepped back and bumped against the sink. "Oh, no," she said.

Gorgon caught the fear in her voice. Quickly he said, "Not as a patient, Mrs. Fields. I was the gardener. Supervisor of the Grounds they called it. I quit about three years ago."

After a deep breath Mrs. Fields said, "You certainly had me going there for a minute."

Gorgon grinned broadly. "You see, it's exactly what I was trying to tell you. Because I look like this, you were afraid I'd run away from Graham today. I tell you, looks of a person means nothing. Why, I've seen lots of women there that look just as sweet and as harmless as you, Mrs. Fields."

"Yes," she said, "I can imagine. But I really don't believe it will be necessary for you to wait around for my husband. I won't let any strangers into this house. I promise you that, Mr. Gorgon. And you've been very kind to warn me of the dangers."

"That's the thing, Mrs. Fields. Don't let anyone into your house when you're alone. Better than that, don't even talk to anyone that comes up to the door, strangers, that you don't know. Oh, I've talked to lots of them out at Graham. Lots of times. And the things they'll tell you. You'd swear they were telling the absolute truth, as long as you didn't know any better. Actors, they are, you might say."

"Well, as soon as you leave I'll bolt and lock everything, Mr. Gorgon. And I assure you I won't even speak to anyone that might drop by."

She reached for his empty glass again, and this time he gave it to her.

As she set it into the sink Gorgon said, "I sure appreciate the way you've put up with me, Mrs. Fields. A lot of people, women especially, can't stand the sight of me. When I try to talk to them they either run or scream for help. I don't get much chance to talk to women. And that's all I wanted to do, chat a bit, when I followed you into the kitchen. You don't know how nice it's been, standing here and passing the time of day with you."

Mrs. Fields smiled. "Well, you're welcome to stop by and chat any time—"

When the urgent knocking began at the front door he saw her stiffen with fright, while panic glazed her eyes. Suddenly she began whipping her head from side to side, like a trapped animal searching for a means of escape. Her mouth opened to let out a scream. Gorgon lunged forward, his huge hand smothering most of her face.

Her hands fought the gag and she tried to jerk free of him, but Gorgon slammed her back against the refrigerator and pressed himself against her so she couldn't move. Briefly he listened to the renewed pounding. Satisfied that they were positioned so they couldn't be seen through the screen door, Gorgon spoke just above a whisper.

"I couldn't let you scream, Mrs. Fields. They'd get the wrong idea. They'd think I'd been bothering you. Then Bellamy would fire me. So you see, that's why I acted like that. It's probably a neighbor stopping to call. Once you settle down I'll let you go to the door."

He felt her trying to speak under his palm, and she squirmed powerfully, trying to slip away from him.

"Come on now, Mrs. Fields. Relax, the way you were when we were talking. It's probably just a friend that's come visiting. I can't have you going to the door all upset, because that wouldn't be good for me. I know. I'm going to turn you loose in a minute so you can go to the door. If it's someone you know, then they'll see that we've just been visiting a bit out here. And if it's a stranger out there, don't worry, I'll take over. I'll see to it they don't harm you."

Slowly he slipped his hand away from her face, and then he took her arm. Gently he moved her forward so that both of them came out of the kitchen together and walked into the front room.

He stopped then, and Mrs. Fields continued walking towards the door. Through the screen he could distinguish the figure of a slim blonde girl.

In a frightened voice Mrs. Fields asked, "Who is it?"

"I need some help with my car. I've got a flat out on the highway."

"Come in, my dear."

Gorgon stood quietly, watching the girl as she entered. She was young, wearing a black sweater and slacks. The soiled and wrinkled trenchcoat was open in the front, and it was way too big for her.

The girl smiled. "My car's about a quarter of a mile from here. Be-

lieve it or not, I don't even know how to change a tire."

"This is my husband," Mrs. Fields said. "Perhaps he'd be good enough to change it for you."

Gorgon stiffened, and then he realized that Mrs. Fields was being smart. Because the girl was a stranger, Mrs. Fields wanted him to take over.

The girl said, "Oh, that would be sweet of him." She smiled at Gorgon. "You're a doll."

"Of course he is," Mrs. Fields said.

Gorgon's face reddened. She'd called him a doll but he could tell she didn't mean it. They never did. Fighting the anger in his voice he said, "You women are all the same. Smile and sweet talk a man when you want some dirty work to be done for you. But when an ugly guy like me wants to talk to you, just to be friendly, you run scared." His breath was whistling through his nose. "Lady, you can get somebody else to change that tire."

When the girl's right hand came out of the trenchcoat pocket it was holding a revolver.

She pointed it at Gorgon's chest. "Okay, Buster, if that's the way you feel about it! Now we'll take your car. Mama comes too." She stepped back and waved them towards the door with her gun. "Let's go."

"Oh, please," Mrs. Fields said softly.

Gorgon suddenly remembered the newscaster's comment about the blonde and the filling station holdup. Looking at the girl now, and at the gun she was holding, he realized it had to be the same blonde.

"Come on!" the blonde snapped. "Move, Creep!"

Gorgon's anger turned his face into a hideous mask.

Grimly he strode towards the door, but suddenly his left arm lashed out. Like a tree branch, it struck the girl's gun hand at the wrist and the gun flew across the room, crashing against the wall.

Gorgon lunged at her, caught her, and briefly fought her legs and fingernails. Then his fist sledged against her chin.

She sank to the floor. As he turned away from her the gun barked behind him, and plaster sprayed from the wall near his head.

Roaring angrily, Gorgon hurtled across the room. Mrs. Fields had the gun up, and she was trying to get away another shot when he crashed into her.

He knocked her backwards, but his rush enabled his long arms to reach out and grab her before she fell. She screamed and fought wildly, trying to get away from him so that she could use the gun. Gorgon clubbed it out of her hand, and then a short chop at the back of her neck knocked her unconscious. She sank limply to the floor.

His face contorted, and gasping for breath, Gorgon scooped up the gun before he planted himself in the center of the room and studied the two women. Then he shook his head. Some women, like that blonde, could never understand how it maddened him when they referred to his looks. He had hit her hard, and she would be out for quite a while. He'd call the police about her later.

Right now, he was concerned about Mrs. Fields. Somehow he'd known from the very beginning that she would panic in a situation like this. It was a good thing he had stayed around, instead of leaving immediately. She would have been at the mercy of the blonde, and probably kidnapped, or even killed.

Now he had to look after Mrs. Fields. Poor thing.

He bent down and picked her up very gently. He'd take her into the bedroom. That was the best place. He would put her on the bed, and then revive her with cold towels.

He started down the hall, and the first door he came to turned out to be the bathroom. Next to it was another room, dark, until Gorgon switched on the light.

Gorgon sucked in his breath and stared at the woman on the bed. She was a redhead, and she was dead. A knife was imbedded in her heart.

Gorgon scowled. Then he shook his head, trying to comprehend what he saw. Numbly he pulled his glance away from her and let it move about the room.

He saw the colored wedding photo on top of the dresser. The man had a flower in the lapel of his coat, but Gorgon's glance fixed on the white-gowned bride. She had flaming red hair, and she was the same woman now dead on the bed.

Gorgon studied the woman he was holding in his arms.

Why, she didn't look like the one from Graham at all.

Career Man

by James Holding

Cardone looked at the tapestry. His eyes sharpened, his thin lips tightened. And he thought to himself, You never know. You really don't. Here I am in a little Hindu shop thousands of miles from home in the middle of this dust bowl called India, and all of a sudden I may be looking at the biggest heist of my entire career.

It was characteristic of Cardone that he used the word "career" in his thoughts to cover the twenty-two years of his life that had started, inauspiciously enough, with muggings and petty burglaries, had proceeded to various grand larcenies committed while armed, and had ultimately ensconced him as a leading practitioner in that most respectable of criminal specialties, bank robbery. Cardone had no scruples, moral or ethical. He was proud of his record, so he called it a "career". It did not signify that his last caper, the robbery of a bank in a small Colorado town, had so nearly ended in his apprehension by the police that he had decided an extended trip abroad might provide a beneficial cooling-off period.

Aside from the slight change in the expression of his eyes and lips, no sign of his emotions showed as he stared through the glass at The Pride of India. Mr. Ganeshi Lall, standing at his shoulder, intoned proudly in excellent English, "There are eighteen thousand jewels embroidered on that tapestry, sir. Emeralds, rubies, diamonds and sapphires, of course, as well as most of the semi-precious stones to be found in India. The tapestry was manufactured in our establishment, the gems sewn into the fabric by our own workmen. Fifty thousand working hours were involved. It demonstrates the fine craftsmanship of Ganeshi Lall & Son."

Cardone nodded, impressed. "It does, indeed," he said. "The six-

by-eight-foot tapestry was literally encrusted with gems. "How much is it worth?"

"One million dollars. At least it is insured for that, you understand. When it was displayed at the World's Fair . . ."

Cardone interrupted him. "And you have it hanging here in plain sight, protected only by this glass case, almost inviting larceny?"

Mr. Lall smiled. "Of course," he said. "It is a great attraction for tourists, naturally. But it is quite safe, please. A very complicated American burglar alarm safeguards it."

Cardone already knew that: The gold leaf of the burglar alarm laced the protective glass through which they gazed at the tapestry, but it was nice to have Mr. Lall, the owner of *The Pride of India*, admit it so readily. With a slight turn of his head, Cardone discovered where the connecting wires entered the room.

A score of other tourists had joined them now before *The Pride of India*. Mr. Lall was busy answering questions from awe-stricken gapers. Cardone, fumbling in his jacket pocket for a cigarette, drifted to the edge of the crowd, sauntered peacefully over to inspect a jade Buddha five yards away. As he withdrew the cigarette from his pocket, it escaped his fingers and fell to the floor near the base of the carved Buddha. Cardone leaned to pick it up. With one swift, beautifully-disguised movement, he used the little tool he had brought from his pocket with the cigarette to sever cleanly the burglar alarm wires that disappeared through the baseboard behind the statue.

It began on the veranda of Lauries Hotel the afternoon before.

Recently arrived in Agra by plane from Bombay, along with thirty other American tourists who wanted to see the Taj Mahal, Cardone registered at the hotel desk, washed up in his room, and was taking the first grateful sip of a cool gin sling on the veranda before dinner, when he felt eyes upon him. That curious sixth sense, so often developed in persons outside the law, warned him that someone had him under observation. He glanced around to locate the observer. All the little nerve ends in his wary body were erect and seeking.

The squatting dhoti-clad sellers of ivory, brass and marble curios who, with their wares, occupied most of the veranda space near him, were paying no attention to him. His fellow tourists, mostly female, chattered like temple monkeys around him, but a quick survey assured

him that none was regarding him. Then he turned his head slightly toward the doorway of the hotel bar and encountered, with an impact almost physical, the eyes that were watching him.

They belonged to a tall, massively-built Hindu with brush-cut hair above a square brown solid face. He stood behind a pillar of the porch to Cardone's right, down three steps on the gravel driveway that bordered the veranda. Dressed in western clothes, his expression was open and candid, and the watching eyes were unusually dark, even for a Hindu. Then Cardone forgot the man's appearance in speculation as to why he was so intensely interested in an American tourist—a perfect stranger, but also, it must be admitted, a slightly hot bank robber at home.

When the Hindu realized Cardone was aware of his scrutiny, he smiled and approached, slipping up the three steps to the veranda gracefully, despite his bulk. "Mr. Cardone?" he asked politely.

Cardone was startled. The guy knew his name. He set his drink down on the table very slowly. "That's me," he admitted coolly. "What can I do for you?" Maybe the fellow had looked over his shoulder when he registered.

"I am Mirajkar Dass," the man introduced himself with a little bow. "Driver and guide. Would the gentleman permit me to show him the Taj Mahal and other Agra sights while in our city? Please?"

Cardone thought Mirajkar's eyes were signaling him, but he didn't know what. "I'm with a tour," he said brusquely, indicating the vociferous group nearby. "We're taken care of, thanks."

"A private guide, sir," the man insisted gently, "is much more satisfactory. I have a very nice American car, and I speak English very good."

"I'm with a tour, buddy. We got a guide, and we see the sights in buses. Thanks just the same."

Mirajkar refused to be brushed off. "I've always admired your work, Mr. Cardone," he said softly.

For an instant, Cardone froze in his chair, oblivious of the chattering tourists around him. Then he looked up at the tall Hindu and nodded reluctantly. "Don't bother me now," he said, "but maybe you've got something with this private guide thing. Come to my room after dinner and we'll talk it over, okay?"

"Okay," Mirajkar agreed instantly, a warm light of pleasure appear-

ing momentarily in his dark eyes. "After dinner, sir." He unobtrusively withdrew to the driveway to take up his stand beside the porch pillar once more.

Does he know my room number too? Cardone wondered uneasily. He took a gulp of his gin sling, his thoughts running oddly on the fact that he really would enjoy seeing Agrá on his own with his own guide, rather than in the company of all the tour members.

After having chicken curry for dinner that was so hot it put to shame the Mexican seasoning Cardone had sampled at home, he lit a cigarette and strolled to his room at the end of the hotel's ground floor colonnade. The flickering electric bulbs along the arcade threw their light only a few feet to either side where it was hungrily swallowed up by the pitch darkness of the hotel's gardens. Cardone was an easy target to anyone concealed in that darkness, he was aware, but although he was small in stature and physically unimpressive, Cardone did not lack courage. His "career" testified to that. He was calm and unhurried in his walk to his room; he even stopped once to take a long savoring breath of the dust-and-dung-scented air. The hand that inserted his key in the door was quite steady.

As the door opened under his hand, he felt a presence materialize behind him. When he switched on the light and turned to close the door, the Hindu was already inside the room.

Cardone, without preamble, said, "How'd you know my name?"

Mirajkar shrugged. "A college classmate of mine was your guide in Bombay last week. He telephoned me you were coming here."

The big Hindu was a college man, it seemed. Cardone automatically fought against a feeling of inferiority that usually assailed him when talking to college graduates. Cardone himself hadn't finished the eighth grade. But why should Mirajkar's pal telephone him that Cardone was coming to Agrá? Just to tout him onto a possible customer for his guide's services? Not likely. Then why?

Pressing for information, Cardone asked, "Why did he do that?"

"Telephone me you were coming? Because he thought you were the right man to help us with a little project we have here in Agrá."

"Wait a minute, buster. What's that mean?"

"He recognized you."

"How could he do that?"

"He was in America getting his Master's degree several years ago, at

the University of Colorado. He saw your photograph in the newspapers."

"Me? He saw my picture in the papers? He was wrong. This is all a big fat mistake. Sorry, buddy."

"No, Mr. Cardone. He remembered the picture very well. You were being questioned in a bank robbery case in Boulder. Everybody thought you were guilty, but nothing tangible could be proved."

"You're so right it couldn't. I'm not completely stupid," he said, "even if I didn't go to college."

"You are a very skillful thief," Mirajkar said with an apologetic gesture of his hands that seemed to disassociate him from the blunt statement. "My friend knew that. That's why he telephoned me."

"I haven't made a score of any kind in India," Cardone hastened to defend himself.

"Of course. That is what I have to offer you, sir, the opportunity to make a wonderful score by helping us."

Cardone breathed out cigarette smoke, relieved. "So sit down," he invited, waving a hand. "I'll turn on the air conditioning."

What could be worth stealing in this jerk town?

As though reading his mind, Mirajkar said in his pleasant baritone, "The Pride of India. It is here in Agra. And it is easily accessible to one of your experience."

"What's The Pride of India?" Cardone asked.

The Hindu told him in some detail.

"A tapestry!" Cardone protested when he had finished. "Six feet by four! What if it's covered with ice? We'd never be able to move it out of Agra once we had it. It's too big."

"Permit me, Mr. Cardone. My friend and I have given a great deal of thought to that. It is another reason why you can be of such help to us."

"Goody," Cardone said sardonically.

"Yes. When you have stolen the tapestry, we will cut the best of the precious stones from the fabric. They are all unset, and not so very large as to be easily recognizable except in India."

"Well, that's an idea," Cardone said. "Then what?"

"Then you smuggle them out of India in your luggage when you go home. With due caution, you realize cash for them in America. I am sure you have connections there to accommodate you in a matter of

this kind?"

"I know a few people," Cardone admitted cautiously. He was beginning to feel his heart beats quicken a little. "What's this Pride of India likely to split out at?"

"We estimate a minimum of a million and a quarter rupees."

"What's that in dollars?"

"Almost a quarter of a million." Mirajkar allowed this succulent figure to hang in the air between them for a moment before he continued. "The tapestry is insured for five million rupees, Mr. Cardone, but that is the estimated value of the tapestry as it is. If we remove the jewels and accept a fifty to seventy-five percent loss on their true value, by reason of having to dispose of them surreptitiously, we should still realize a quarter of a million dollars."

Cardone said, "That's important sugar. Split three ways, eh?"

"Split two ways. Half for you, half for us. After all, you will do most of the work."

"That's for sure. Otherwise you'd never proposition me."

"Does it sound attractive to you?"

"It has possibilities. What did you say your name is?"

"Mirajkar Dass."

"I'll call you Dass," Cardone said. "That other name's a laugh."

Mirajkar bowed, smiling. "As you wish, sir. The Pride of India hangs behind a glass case in the shop of Ganeshi Lall & Son on Mahatma Gandhi Road, right near this hotel. Almost every American tourist who comes to Agra goes into the shop to see it."

"How hard will the store be to crack?"

"Not difficult for you. No night guards are left, if that is what you mean, and you are good with locks, we have heard."

Cardone was modest. "Not too bad," he said.

"But there are burglar alarms. That is mainly why we need you. You must have had a wide experience with them?"

Cardone grinned. "I'm the best little alarm-gimmicker in the business. But I want to see the layout before we try anything."

"Good," Mirajkar said. "Tomorrow you can see it without suspicion. All your group will probably see it. As your private guide, I will take you there when there is a good crowd. You can look at the door locks and the burglar alarm arrangements, perhaps prepare things for an attempt tomorrow night?"

"We'll see. Anyway, you're hired as my guide and driver."

"I shall try to give satisfactory service."

"Yeah, but wait a minute. You're going too fast, Dass. You say I'm going to take these jewels to America, fence them for cash, then send you your share. Is that right?"

"That is right."

"You'll trust me to take the stuff and send your cut?"

"We must, Mr. Cardone. It is all we can do. We cannot gimmick (is that the word you used?) the burglar alarms at Lall's without you. Even if we could, we could not dispose of the gems in India. They are known here. When the tapestry is stolen, the announcement of its theft will alert every jeweler in India. So we *must* trust you. You can see the point. No?"

"What makes you think I won't keep the whole bundle for myself once I get to America?"

Mirajkar said seriously, "There is honor among thieves, is there not?"

Cardone nodded solemnly, then he probed a little deeper. "What is it with you two guys, Dass, that you're getting into the heist racket? You're both college men, aren't you? You got brains. You got good jobs as guides . . ."

Mirajkar interrupted him indignantly. "Good jobs! There are no good jobs in India. We are guides and chauffeurs to tourists, that is all! And we must have a college education to be eligible even for that!

"Most of our income is in tips from rich Americans and, forgive me, most of you are not generous. We will not live like this for the rest of our lives. We are educated men, worthy of more dignified treatment, and we shall get it when we have a quarter million rupees apiece." The soft eyes blazed and the big hands clenched in unmistakable earnestness.

"Okay, okay, Dass," said Cardone, feeling infinitely better about his own abbreviated education. "Don't make a production of it, pal. I see what you mean." He lit another cigarette and offered the Hindu one. They smoked in companionable silence for a time. Cardone's mind was busy. At last he said to Mirajkar, "Tell me about this alarm system."

That's how it happened that Cardone visited the shop of Ganeshi Lall the next afternoon. Before he left it, he thoroughly nullified the

system of burglar alarms that protected The Pride of India. Lall's boast of a very complicated American burglar alarm proved, upon expert inspection, to have been a major over-assessment of an almost primitive arrangement. Inconspicuously and skillfully, therefore, during ostensible tourist shopping in the Lall showroom, Cardone had arranged that the Pride of India's alarm system, when switched on at closing time that night, would appear as efficient as usual but would fail to function. Even the door alarms, meant to alert the police in their headquarters a block away in case of any attempt to enter Lall's shop, were put out of commission with an ease that Cardone found laughable.

When he entered Mirajkar's automobile, waiting for him on the dusty drive before Lall's emporium, he was still chuckling. To the anxious question in Dass' eyes, he answered, "It was a breeze, Dass. We'll be able to lift the rug tonight without even working up a sweat."

Mirajkar put his car in gear and pulled away from Lall's. "We will now visit the tomb of Akbar the Great at Sikandra," he said in his best guide's voice, then added in his own, "You like the tapestry?"

"Terrific, Dass."

"You believe the project worthwhile, then." The car rattled and shook as Mirajkar guided it northward toward the Delhi Gate. "How long do you estimate it will take you to steal the tapestry tonight, sir?"

Cardone said blandly, "Portal to portal, not more than five minutes. I'll be inside the ship in two, have the tapestry out of its frame in two more, and be back outside in one more. Five minutes, Dass. I've already done all the hard work."

Mirajkar nodded, excitement gripping him. "My friend in Bombay was right. You are a professional, Mr. Cardone. I respect you for it."

"It don't pay to get mixed up with amateurs," Cardone said. He felt expansive, sure of success. He basked a little in the Hindu's admiration.

"Five minutes," Mirajkar repeated. "Then we can do it on our way to the Taj Mahal tonight and never be missed. There is full moon tonight, and all tourists must see the Taj by moonlight. Your tour members will go in their bus. I shall drive you. But we will stop for five minutes at Lall's on the way, you understand. We will leave the hotel when your tour does, and arrive at the Taj at the same time. Five minutes we can spare easily by taking a short cut. You see?"

"Okay, you're the doctor. That sounds like enough of an alibi for me,

but I want to be sure of a safe place to cut the ice out of the rug, and a foolproof way to smuggle the loose stones out of India."

"Both are easily supplied," Mirajkar said. "We will cut the gems from the tapestry at the Taj itself, immediately after we steal the tapestry."

"At the Taj?" Cardone had already viewed the magnificent tomb of Mumtaz Mahal by sunrise that morning. "You're nuts! It's a public place. It'll be dark. We'll be surrounded by romantic tourists."

"I have a key to one of the minarets, Mr. Cardone, moulded long ago in the hope of future usefulness. The minarets have been closed to the public for years. Many people used to commit suicide by casting themselves down from them, inspired by the romantic love and tragic end of Shahjahan and Mumtaz, no doubt. So we shall be very private at the top of a minaret, with no interruptions."

"Light?"

"Moonlight will serve, sir. Full moon tonight, as I said."

"What about the smuggling bit?"

"All planned, Mr. Cardone. I estimate the gems we shall cut from the tapestry will be fairly bulky, even though we take merely the better ones. Perhaps a two-quart measure might hold them. Do you agree?"

"So?"

"I have prepared three wooden carvings for you to take home from India as souvenirs. They are carvings of the three wives of Lord Shiva, the Destroyer—Parvati, the goddess of domestic happiness; Durga, the goddess of power; Kali, the goddess of blood and war."

"Never mind the theology, Dass," said Cardone. "What about the carvings?"

"These statues are common tourist souvenirs, turned out by the hundreds here, but our three are slightly different. They are hollow, with a screw-on base for each that cunningly fits into a crease in the fold of each lady's garment. I guarantee the joint to be undetectable by any customs official. The jewels will be placed inside the three carvings, stuffed in solidly and packed with cotton." Mirajkar smiled, turning his head to look at Cardone in the back seat. "Good?"

"Okay," said Cardone. "Where are they?"

"Under that lap rob beside you, sir."

Cardone examined the carvings. "Pretty clever, Dass. These ought

to do it." He lit a cigarette. "What happens to the rug after we've cut off the ice?"

"It stays in the minaret of the Taj. No one ever goes there now."

That seemed to cover it. Cardone leaned back in his seat as they passed the lunatic asylum on the Sikandra road and relaxed. The eyes of his body saw mango, neem, tamarind and acacia trees march by, enlivened by flitting mynah birds, crows, flocks of green parrots, and vultures perched patiently on gnarled limbs, waiting for something to die; but the eyes of his mind beheld only double handfuls of diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires. Cardone touched absently with a forefinger the bulge under his arm where his gun lay, and looking at the back of Marajkar's head, his thin lips curved in what passed with him for a smile.

That night, it all went like clockwork. Waving gaily to the busload of his fellow tourists as they started out from the hotel at nine o'clock, Cardone and his driver-guide, Mirajkar, were already parking the car in the wide parking lot before the Taj gate by the time the bus arrived. No one suspected that they had stopped for five minutes before the darkened shop of Ganeshi Lall, and that The Pride of India was now in Mirajkar's car. No one thought anything of the fact that Mirajkar, as a private guide who knew the foibles of tourists extremely well, was carrying an automobile lap robe over his arm when they left the car, in case his "gentleman" might want to sit for awhile on the damp grass, or a marble pool coping, and contemplate in awed silence the most magnificent tomb in the world. No one missed them when Cardone and Mirajkar wandered slowly down the cypress-lined mall past the silent fountains before the Taj, loudly admiring its ethereal beauty in the moonlight, and disappeared.

The blinking oil lamps carried by the Taj Mahal guards cast weird shadows inside the soaring arch of the entrance and on the marble platform nearby, where daytime tourists obtained their mosque slippers to prevent their infidel feet from violating the sanctity of the tomb.

The minaret to which Mirajkar had a key was on the northeast corner of the enormous platform, behind the Taj. Its slender finger pointed to the sky directly above the river bank. They approached it carefully in the moonlight from the side avoiding the front entrance of the Taj entirely.

Mirajkar fumbled in the shadowed side of the galleried obelisk to get the small iron door open. Cardone looked upward. At the top of the minaret, he saw the open, pillared gallery that crowned it. Then he looked sidelong toward the entrance of the Taj, now out of sight, where the nearest guard would be, noting with satisfaction that it was almost a hundred yards away. He whispered, nevertheless, when he spoke to Mirajkar.

"This is real privacy, Dass. You couldn't have done better."

"Thanks. I think it will serve well enough."

The door came open with a loud rasp of metal against marble which Mirajkar ignored calmly. "No one could possibly hear it," he explained when Cardone inadvertently winced.

They entered the narrow door at the foot of the minaret. "Go on up," the Hindu told Cardone. He shifted the rug over his arm to a more comfortable position. "To the top."

"Okay. Need any help with the tapestry? It must weigh a hundred pounds."

"No, thanks, sir. I can manage it." Mirajkar patted the concealing lap robe fondly.

Cardone began to climb the narrow spiral stairway of marble inside the minaret. He counted the steps almost unconsciously, and was surprised when the total came to a hundred and sixty-four. He was puffing when he emerged into the small circular chamber at the top. Between the graceful columns that walled the gallery, he could see the moonlit Jumna River below him curving away across the plain to the north; to the west were the clustered lights and houses of Agra, huddled around the massive dark walls of the Fort; to the south the huge, moon-bright domes of the Taj Mahal were almost on a level with his eyes. The view was breathtaking.

Cardone gave it only a quick glance, however. He turned as Mirajkar labored up out of the dark stairwell behind him. "Bring it over where we can see, Dass. Put the rug down on the floor here in the moonlight and we'll start to operate." He laughed. "Got your fingernail scissors?"

Mirajkar nodded. He put the lap robe, and what it concealed, carefully down on the floor without unfolding it. "I have them in my pocket. It shouldn't take us long." He reached into his jacket pocket.

Cardone said, "Might as well give me the car keys too."

"The car keys?" Mirajkar looked at Cardone in surprise.

"Yeah," said Cardone, his voice amused. "You won't be needing them any more. I will, however."

The Hindu drew in his breath with a faint hiss. Instead of manicure scissors with which to cut the gems free of the tapestry, Cardone held in his hand a gun fitted with a silencer. It was pointing unwaveringly at Mirajkar's heart.

"But, Mr. Cardone, we are partners in this!" The guide ran out of words and was silent, his eyes glinting big in the moonlight.

"We *were* partners, Dass. But who needs you now?"

The tall Hindu looked briefly toward the dark stairwell. He said nothing.

"Too late to scram," Cardone said. "You understand why I have to kill you, don't you?"

"No. You could get to America and merely keep all the proceeds from the jewels yourself. Why kill me?"

"Because I can take it from here without your help. As a professional, I wouldn't want to leave an eyewitness to a heist of mine behind me, would I?"

"I suppose not. You said it does not pay to get mixed up with amateurs."

"You got it now, pal, and you're an amateur." Cardone laughed softly. "I've got to hand it to you, though, for lining this caper up—right down to the hollow carvings I can use to smuggle the ice out."

"They aren't here," Mirajkar reminded him.

"They're in the car, and that's where I'm going after I cut the stuff off the rug. Let's have the keys, buddy boy."

Slowly Mirajkar handed them over. "If you shoot me, someone will hear you. You will be trapped in this tower."

"I cased the minaret before we came up. It's too far away, especially with this." He touched the silencer on his pistol barrel.

"My friend in Bombay will know you killed me."

"I'll take that chance. What's he know, anyhow? Nothing. I'll be in Paris before he even knows you're dead."

"Paris?"

"Or someplace else. You don't think I'd go back home with this loot, do you? I'm hot there right now."

"You promised to, and send us our share."

"Yeah, that's right. Honor among thieves, wasn't it? Even if you're a college man, Dass, your I.Q. is for the birds. I'm flying out of here tomorrow morning—for somewhere, and I'll leave your car right in its regular place in front of the hotel. Nobody will even know you're dead, sucker. They'll be worrying about The Pride of India being gone. No time to wonder about a missing native guide."

"I see," said Mirajkar slowly. "You shoot me. You cut the jewels off the tapestry there," he nodded toward the lap robe, "go out and put them into the carvings, drive my car back to the hotel and leave Agra tomorrow."

"That's about it. You got any better ideas?"

"Yes: Let me help you cut the jewels off before you shoot me. It will save valuable time for you. The Taj grounds close at ten o'clock, you know. You may not finish the job in time alone."

Cardone cast a quick glance at his wristwatch. "I'll make it, Dass. Don't worry." His finger tightened on the trigger of the gun. Mirajkar stood motionless.

"Goodbye, sucker," Cardone said. "No hard feelings." He pulled the trigger.

The Hindu leaned slowly over toward the lap robe on the floor. When he straightened up again, he held the robe loosely in his hand. There was nothing on the floor where it had been.

"The Pride of India is not here, Cardone," he said. His tone contained the barest suggestion of contempt. "You have made what you call a big fat mistake."

Cardone hardly heard him. He was looking accusingly at the gun in his hand, genuine shock in his eyes. "What is this?" he said unbelievably. He pointed the barrel at Dass and pulled the trigger six times in rapid succession. The clicks of the hammer falling on empty chambers were like small deprecatory sounds a man makes with his tongue and teeth when he is overwhelmingly frustrated.

"Yesterday," said Mirajkar, "I was one of the drivers that brought your party from the airport to the hotel. I also helped to distribute your luggage to the proper rooms. I placed your bag in your room, sir, while you were registering. It had your name on it, so I took a quick glance inside and found your gun. Knowing I might have dealings with you later, if fortune favored me, I took the liberty of removing the cartridge—just in case." He smiled in the moonlight, his teeth appear-

ing big and white in the dark face: "It seems I was wise to do so."

Cardone grunted. "This was before you braced me on the veranda?"

"Certainly."

"I take it back, Dass. You're no amateur."

Mirajkar bowed. "Thank you. From you, it is a compliment."

"Where's The Pride of India? Still in the car?"

"Yes. I thought it could do no harm to take precautions, so I slipped it out from under the lap robe just as we left."

"You're pretty sharp, Dass. I'll give you that. You've played this whole thing pretty cool for a foreigner. So now we start over, is that it?"

"Not quite, Mr. Cardone. As you so admirably phrased it, who needs you now? You stole The Pride of India for me, handling the burglar alarm systems very professionally. To my shame, I know nothing about electricity."

"Yeah, I know. You're just an amateur."

"Exactly, sir. But now that The Pride of India is in my hands, your usefulness ends, I fear."

"How do you figure? You still can't dispose of those jewels off the tapestry without me, pal. You said yourself it was impossible in India."

"Quite true."

"So?" Cardone tried to sound more confident than he felt. He fiddled with the empty gun in his hand, damning himself for a fool for not checking it when he'd strapped the holster on that morning. "You'll be needing me to fence the stuff for you. Right?"

"Not right. I never intended to cut the gems from the tapestry, Mr. Cardone."

The American suddenly felt trapped. Too many surprises were coming at him all at once. He raised his eyebrows. "Then why the hollowed-out statues and all that jazz?"

"Merely additional touches to assure you of my good faith."

"Good faith!" Cardone laughed with a high, hysterical giggle.

"Let me explain, sir. My friend in Bombay who told me about you is in reality my cousin. He is the son of my uncle who works for the insurance company that insures The Pride of India for five million rupees."

Cardone's shoulder slumped.

"When The Pride of India is reported stolen, the insurance company

will generously pay a ten percent reward for its return, with no questions asked. I happen to know that; because my uncle's company paid that amount on a previous occasion." Mirajkar coughed.

"For the return of The Pride of India? It's been heisted before?"

"Once before; this is the second time. Without undue pride I may tell you, sir, that on both occasions the theft was arranged by me."

"You collected the reward before?"

Mirajkar bowed.

"And will collect it again this time?"

"Yes. A quarter of a million rupees for my cousin and me."

"I'm sorry—sorry I called you an amateur."

The Hindu shrugged. "My cousin does the difficult part—selecting professional help for us from among his tourist groups in Bombay, as he selected you, Mr. Cardone. Of course, we must pay a small percentage to my uncle with the insurance company for his cooperation."

Cardone thought, *Amateurs!* But this time he didn't speak it aloud.

Mirajkar said, "It is too bad you underestimated us, sir. But take comfort, you will die in the most beautiful tourist attraction in the world." Curiously enough, Mirajkar's voice held a note of genuine emotion when he spoke of the Taj.

"Die?"

"What else can you expect? You yourself said it is unprofessional to leave a living witness behind you."

That's when Cardone gave up hope. He reversed the gun in his hand and hurled it savagely at the Hindu's head, but with a negligent lifting of the lap robe in his hand, the Hindu caught the gun in its wooden folds. It dropped harmlessly to the floor with a small metallic crash.

Mirajkar reached then for the American. There was no escape for the smaller man. The Hindu towered over him. His arms were like steel ropes around Cardone's body. He forced Cardone toward the pillars of the tiny gallery.

"You will be a suicide, sir," he said into Cardone's ear with amusement. "I shall tell the authorities when they find you that, as your guide and driver for the past two days, I have heard you speaking with deep despair of an unrequited love—the great love of your life. I shall tell them you came away from America to try to get over this passion of yours for another man's wife, but that your emotions must have

overcome you when you saw by moonlight the ineffable beauty of the Taj Mahal where lie the remains of history's most romantic couple. And alas, while I waited for you, at your request, in the gardens below, you must have done as so many star-crossed lovers have done before you: leaped to your death from a minaret gallery. I may even raise the alarm over your absence at closing time myself." He forced Cardone to look downward over the gallery's edge. "As your official guide, sir, I can inform you that the distance you will fall is exactly one hundred sixty-two and a quarter feet."

Cardone struggled helplessly in the big Hindu's grip. Mirajkar casually offered the crowning insult by holding Cardone with only one hand while his other dipped into Cardone's pocket for the car keys only recently surrendered to him.

"It will be readily explained," he continued to speak remorselessly, "how you could gain entrance to a locked minaret to stage your act of self-destruction. Were you not a professional burglar? One of the best? A criminal to whom opening a little door like this would be merest child's play? I bid you goodbye, Mr. Cardone. And our deepest thanks for your professional assistance."

Almost negligently, he brought the edge of one stiffened hand against Cardone's Adam's apple, effectively paralyzing his vocal chords, choking off the shout for help that was bubbling in the American's throat. Then he quickly pushed Cardone over the gallery's edge between two of the columns.

Falling, Cardone saw the black-and-white marble squares of the Taj Mahal platform rushing up to meet him like a pinwheeling, demented chess board. He made no sound. He was voiceless. But he was conscious, for a split second before his shattered body became a dark blot on the moon-washed marble, of an obscure sense of satisfaction that it had taken a college man to best him in his chosen profession.



A Flower in Her Hair

by Pauline C. Smith

“While you’re here, I s’pose I better take you over to see Aunt Abbie.”

“Aunt Abbie?” questioned the girl. “Who is she?”

“Well, she ain’t really an aunt, but she’s some relation . . .” Melinda’s voice trailed off as her memory attempted to locate the offshoot on the family tree that was Aunt Abbie. “Bein’ my second cousin, I guess she’s pretty fur removed from you.” She gazed at her visitor uncertainly, then her eyes turned resolute. “But she’s blood kin, so you should see her.”

“Why?” The girl was growing impatient of distant family ties woven to strangle her in this strange country of her mother’s.

Melinda bustled. “She’s the record keeper. Got second sight too.”

“When do we have to go?” Tradition and folklore were losing their piquancy.

Again Melinda looked doubtfully upon the city-bred frailty of her guest. “Well, it’s quite a piece. Rough ground. But I guess we better get over there today, you’re leavin’ so soon.”

The girl sighed, mentally ticking off the hours left to her here.

In the hot sun she followed in the wake of Melinda’s angular maturity, which plowed a furrow through weeds and thistle, over boulder-strewn hillsides bare of trees and bristling with prickly growth that offered no protection from the beating heat.

At last, Melinda turned to look at the girl behind her. “We better stop and rest awhile, I guess.” She eased her bulk down carefully, watching her companion slump to the ground. “Tired, ain’tcha?”

The girl nodded.

“I shoulda remembered you ain’t used to this kind o’ country. Your face sure is flushed.”

The girl thrust out a lower lip to blow cooling air across her cheeks.

"You redheads sunburn, don'tcha?"

Again the girl nodded.

Melinda turned reflective. "Don't know that there ever was a redhead in the family before . . ."

"My father had auburn hair."

"Oh. I never seen him. Your ma's hair was black's a raven's wing."

"I remember."

Melinda heaved herself to her broad feet. "Might's well get goin' if we want to get back by sundown. Ain't fur now." She pointed. "Just up the hill and over to the ridge. See it in a little bit."

The cabin finally appeared in the distance, like a lookout on the rim.

Staring curiously, the girl asked, "Is that it?"

"That's it. Aunt Abbie's lived there now goin' on fifty year."

"How old is she?"

They had reached the summit. The cabin squatted beneath bowed trees that held hands over its roof.

"She must be over seventy now. Spry, though. Spry's a chicken."

Melinda took a sidelong glance at her weary companion. "Climbs these hills like a mountain goat when she's a mind to."

The girl knew even a gentle thrust when she felt one. Her mouth tightened. "Well," she said flatly, "I just hope she's spry enough to get me a nice cold drink of water."

"She'll have grapejuice. Always keeps a pitcherful down in the cave."

The girl paused to stare over the ridge and into the gorge below. She backed up, trembling. "Are you sure she's home?"

"Aunt Abbie? Oh, sure. She don't go noplase. Always busy," Melinda said with certainty as she stepped through a broken gate and up a path hemmed in by weed-choked flowers.

The door was open. Melinda poked her head through. "Aunt Abbie," she shrieked. Behind her, the girl stumbled over a claw hammer at the sill. She kicked it aside and into the weeds.

"Aunt Abbie," shouted Melinda again.

"Yes, yes, yes. I'm a-comin'."

Erupting from the shadows, peering into the sunlight, Aunt Abbie strained forward. As Melinda had said, she was spry, as spry as a taut steel spring. Her meager nose projected itself before her. Her dark eyes were lodestones and her mouth an iron bar.

"Oh, it's you, Melinda. Who's that you got with you?"

Melinda stepped aside to give the girl an abrupt shove into the room. "This here's Marty's girl. She's been stoppin' with us a coupla days."

Aunt Abbie sifted relationships through her mind. "Marty's girl." Inspecting her, she reached forth a clawlike hand with a feather touch. The girl drew minutely away. "Come in. Come in and set down."

Sidling into the room, the girl backed to a chair, feeling the slick, wooden arms of it with her fingertips. As she sat on the edge of the broken cane seat, Aunt Abbie stood before her. Again the claws reached out. "Marty's girl. Such pretty red hair." Talons hovered over the girl's shining head, suspended there. "Such awful-pretty red hair." Aunt Abbie turned to Melinda. "Did you ever see such pretty red hair?"

Melinda shook her head. "Can't say I ever did. Guess I never seen any red hair in this family before. She says she got it from her pa."

The girl shrank, her eyes moving cautiously from Aunt Abbie to the objects in the room—cluttered and stacked souvenirs—a chaos of remembrance.

"She's thirsty," suggested Melinda.

Aunt Abbie took another covetous look at the flaming hair. "Such a pretty red. Yes, Melinda. I'll fetch some grapejuice." She scuttled from the room.

The girl heard a door slam, quick, staccato footsteps descending.

The room grew brighter as her eyes adjusted. "So much stuff," she murmured.

"Aunt Abbie keeps everything," Melinda explained proudly. "All the family records too. Them rugs she made from relations' clothes."

As Melinda gestured with humble admiration, the girl looked down upon the oblongs, circles, hooked and braided, crocheted and cross-stitched; utilization of the rags of memory, placed in precision like an army, white pine boards between the battalions.

"She made all them samplers too."

The girl raised her eyes to stare at the walls with their exquisite needlework. Each square of cloth threaded with a MAY HE REST IN PEACE or derivative. "When they die," explained Melinda, "she stitches 'em up."

The girl shuddered, drowned in her own morbid fascination. Her

eyes fixed themselves on the bright colors of death.

"I'll try and get Aunt Abbie to show you the wreath," Melinda whispered, her eyes rolling, her breast swelling beneath coarse cotton, her large spare body quivering with anticipation.

The girl offered no answering interest, intent only upon the sound of scrambling footsteps as they returned. Her every thought, every desire, was to get away from here, from the saffron face of Aunt Abbie, her nimble tread, the heavy cup pushed so gently, ever so insidiously, into her hand.

The girl sipped the cold, dark liquid.

"Good, ain't it?" prodded Melinda.

She nodded with a faint smile and a thread of purple parting her lips. Stiffly then, with eyes averted, she placed the half-full cup on the marble-topped table at her side.

Aunt Abbie stood lightly on a hooked memorial, watching her. "Your ma had black hair." She turned to Melinda. "Remember how dark Marty's hair was?"

Melinda nodded. "I thought maybe you'd show us your you-know-what . . ."

Aunt Abbie looked speculatively at the girl. She extended a hand, fingers curved, almost touching the bright hair. "I'll fetch it."

The girl was deep in the chair now, feeling the stiff, jagged ends of broken cane. Her stomach curled; streaks of cold hunched her shoulders. Sluggishly, she gazed out at the shaft of sunshine in the doorway.

"Oh, the book of records too," called Melinda, leaning forward as Aunt Abbie returned to squat before the girl.

Carefully, Aunt Abbie laid the large gilt frame on a braided rug. She opened a book upon her knees.

"That," explained Melinda, "is the family record. The first part shows the birthings. The last part, the dyings."

Aunt Abbie flipped pages, her sepia fingers fondling the last of them, clean and unwritten. "How old are you, my dear?"

"Twenty-four."

"Just twenty-four. Well, well. Your ma lived to be . . . let's see . . ." She leafed back. "Thirty-two. Your branch of the family always did go young. Your pa ain't in here. He wan't kin."

"Dad died last year."

"You're all alone?"

"Well, yes . . ."

"Except for us."

The girl was hazily displeased with the tie-in. "I'm just passing through here," she said in minor revolt, "on my way home. To the coast," she added, feeling the necessity of identity, a longing for familiarity.

"Well, well, well," Aunt Abbie crooned absently. Her mind seemed to wander as her eyes studied the girl. "Well," and she smiled, her lips sucking her teeth briskly. "So you want to see the wreath?"

"Wreath?"

"The hair wreath." Aunt Abbie placed the book on the floor and picked up the oval gilt frame. Its curves caught the beams of light from the doorway. She held it up against her knees, her fingers holding it in place. Steadily, she watched the girl.

The girl stared down and into a circlet of flowers painstakingly woven against the linen background. Twined into the floral hoop bloomed the white of cherry blossom, the gray of cactus spine, yellow daisies, brown iris, ashen lilies, goldenrod . . .

Aunt Abbie bent her head, her liver-colored claw pointing out a portion of the wreath. "See them? Them are black-eyed Susans. The centers come straight from your ma's hair. Pretty, ain't they?" The finger caressed the glossy black.

"My mother's hair?" The girl drew back, held her breath and allowed her face to blank out in utter disbelief.

"This here's made of hair. Didn't you know?"

The girl stared glassily at this incredible woman and her absurd handwork. She felt the sharp gouge of broken cane and the hard rungs of the chair against her back.

"It's got hair in it from every one of the family that's passed on."

Melinda hitched closer, tipping her head as she gazed proudly down upon the wreath. "Ain't it pretty now? Ain't it just elegant?" She shook her head with wonder. "How she does it, I'll never know—all them fine hairs, the little bitty stitches. I wouldn't never have the patience."

"You mean that's hair?" The girl clung to the arms of the chair because here was substance, here reality. "Human hair? All of it?"

Aunt Abbie nodded, pleased. "Just the family though," she qualified with dignity. "I wa'n't never one to fool with any that ain't kin."

"And all those people are dead?"

Rising, Aunt Abbie leaned the frame against a table and stepped back to view it. "That's how I keep 'em. It's a kind of memorial. Shows my respect, sort of."

The girl stared at her, then back to the wreath. Her lips stretched, her nostrils flared.

"See?" Aunt Abbie's long finger pointed. "I ain't got that rose in yet." Reflectively, she gazed at the girl in the chair. "I just got the rose left."

The empty spot severed the circle like a break in a wedding ring. Outlines of rose petals had been sketched upon the linen. "It's all that's left. Once I get that in, the wreath'll be done."

The room began to swing, the wreath whirled concentrically, wreath within wreath, circle upon circle. Heat held the girl's body; chill released it. She placed an uncertain hand before her eyes. "I'm a little sick," she whispered weakly. Attempting to rise, she stumbled, and was caught in Melinda's strong but gentle grasp.

"She's a city girl," she faintly heard Melinda apologize. "She ain't used to the walk we took. We'll lay her on your cot, Aunt Abbie."

She felt herself half-dragged, half-carried, through rolling blackness.

Melinda stepped from the sleeproom while Aunt Abbie tarried to stroke the shining hair on the pillow. Melinda paused in thought.

"She's a pretty sick girl. Too much, sun, maybe. Her skin looks kinda green, don't it?"

"Such pretty, pretty red hair," said Aunt Abbie.

"Could be . . ." Melinda hesitated, absorbed now with a problem, beset by it and confused, "could be I best go home alone and get Tom to come back with the truck and fetch her." She looked upon Aunt Abbie for confirmation. "She couldn't never walk through them hills again the way she—"

"You do that." Aunt Abbie's decision was immediate and definite. She urged Melinda to the door, through it, and out into the sunshine. "There ain't no hurry now. Not a mite of it. I'll tend to the girl. Don't you worry on it. I'll see she gets a nice long sleep."

Without a single backward glance, Melinda walked over the boulders in the setting sun. Familiar with Aunt Abbie's competent hands and second sight, she felt a sense of accomplishment. Hadn't Aunt Abbie cured Old Opal of the jumps? And predicted the death of little Junie May? Nobody believed her that time, the baby being so fat and rosy-

like. But lo and behold! Junie May died like *that!* Melinda, in recollection, chopped the air with her hand. That child's hair turned into the brightest yellow buttercups of them all.

When Tom arrived at near-dark, Melinda told him, "There ain't no rushin' hurry. Aunt Abbie'll take care of the girl good. It's best we don't unsettle her rest tonight. We'll fetch her first thing in the mornin' though, so's she can catch her train."

At daybreak, Melinda was pleased to relax on the seat of the truck. She spread her dress down over her thighs and leaned back against the wooden brace. The trip to Aunt Abbie's didn't take long this way, through dust-streaked fennel and the cool clear dawn.

"We'll fetch her right back home so's she can pack up. It sure makes a girl puny to raise her up in the city. You wouldn't think that a bit of walk like that would get her to ailin', now, would you? She's a sweet little thing, though, even if she ain't healthy. I've growed real fond on her."

Aunt Abbie's cabin crouched in the shadow of the trees, a dreary and somnolent recluse. Melinda walked around it to the open door. She kicked a hammer from the sill into the weeds, and bent over to pick up a pocket mirror from the warped floor.

Inside, Aunt Abbie formed a pale sickle of absorption in the shadows, intent upon her needle, the gilt frame propped before her.

"How-is she?" called Melinda.

Aunt Abbie turned slowly to peer through the gloom. "How's who?"

"Why, Marty's girl, Aunt Abbie. She got to ailin' while we was visitin' yesterday. Remember?"

Aunt Abbie's mind seemed to reach back into all the yesterdays where it groped, fumbled, poked and pried. "Oh, the redhead." She turned back to her work and, with great care, slid her needle into the linen, the copper-red strand glinting against the half-finished rose. "Well now, Melinda, did I tell you I seen death on that girl?"

Melinda clutched her heart and knew sudden terror. Then she rocked back to awe and veneration. "You seen that, Aunt Abbie? Like you seen it in Junie May?" Melinda was hypnotized by the shine of a wondrous second sight.

"Just the same," said Aunt Abbie nodding. "Just the same," and took another stitch.

"You mean she's dead now, Aunt Abbie?"

"She's dead now."

Aunt Abbie's words impaled Melinda's mind, to send her glance, slant-eyed, around the shadows of the room, searching out, yet sliding from the girl's departed soul.

It was then Melinda discovered the mirror in her hand—the mirror she had found on the porch. With reverence, she placed it, clear as a circular pond, upon the marble-topped table. She felt a moment's sharp grief for Marty's girl, quickly followed by respect for Aunt Abbie's ever-accurate prognostications. Melinda's breast was full of sorrow and it almost burst with pride.

With humility, Melinda took a step closer to the wreath. The rose had begun to take form, bright and shining, under Aunt Abbie's able fingers.

"Where is she?" asked Melinda in hushed tones. "Did you lay her out on your cot, Aunt Abbie?"

"She went walkin' to death, Melinda." Aunt Abbie turned from her work and pierced Melinda with eyes that held the gift of knowledge. "Some folk do that, Melinda. They go walkin' out to meet their death. Marty's girl went out to meet hers and tumbled right over into the gorge."

Melinda could see it—the girl with outstretched arms—the gorge a black and yawning mouth.

"She's there *now*?" Melinda asked.

"Right down in the gorge. A broken flower." Aunt Abbie returned to the wreath.

Melinda watched the bright hair snake through linen. She was fully aware that Aunt Abbie never snipped a live lock. Never. How many times had she observed Aunt Abbie's assistance to the dying? The mirror held patiently near to parted lips until no further fog clouded the surface. *Then* came the slash of scissors, and an aster grew upon the wreath, a russet chrysanthemum—now a rose.

Melinda's sorrowful, pride-filled mind knew perplexity. If Marty's girl had walked to death, had toppled over the rim and dropped deep in the gorge to meet it, how had Aunt Abbie gone through the rites, those never-changing rites of the mirror, the slash of blades and the lock of hair?

Melinda retreated a reluctant step.

How?

Melinda's mind groped for understanding through its fog of indecision. Aunt Abbie was spry, spry as a mountain goat, but Melinda hadn't known she was spry enough to spring up the sheer face of the gorge—with scissors, hair and a mirror in her hand.

Melinda heaved a final sigh of acceptance. She guessed she was, though. Aunt Abbie, with her second sight and her talent for keeping the record, could do most anything, Melinda guessed.

"That's a mighty pretty rose," she said at last.

"Mighty pretty. And ain't it red?"



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by Talmage Powell

When I left her apartment, I skedaddled straight to Mr. Friedland's estate. I left the car standing in the driveway and went in the big stone mansion like a coon with a pack on his trail.

I asked the butler where Mr. Friedland was, and the butler said our boss was in the study. So I busted in the study and closed the heavy walnut door behind me quick.

Mr. Friedland was at his desk. He looked up, bugged for a second by me coming in this way. But he didn't bless me out. He got up quick and said, "What's the matter, William?"

I knuckled some sweat off my forehead, walked to the desk, and laid the envelope down. The envelope had a thousand smackers, cash, in it.

Mr. Friedland picked up the money. He looked a little addlepat. "You did go to Marla Scanlon's apartment, William?"

"Yes, sir."

"She was there?"

"Yes, sir."

"But she didn't accept the money? William, I simply can't believe it."

I couldn't think of an easy way to explain it to him. "She's dead, Mr. Friedland."

He cut his keen eyes from the money to me. He was a lean, handsome man who looked about thirty-five years old in the face. It was just the pure white hair that hinted at his real age.

"Dead?" he said. "How, William?"

"Looked to me like somebody strangled her to death. I didn't hang around to make sure. There's bruises on her neck, and her tongue is stuck out and all swelled up like a hunk of bleached liver. She was a

mighty fetching hunk of female," I added with a sigh.

"Yes," Mr. Friedland said, "she was."

"But she don't look so good now."

"Was she alone in the apartment?"

"I reckon. I didn't feel the urge to poke around. Just had a look at her there on her living-room floor and hightailed it here."

Mr. Friedland absently put the thousand bucks in his inside coat pocket. "She was alive three hours ago. She phoned me, just before I went out. I returned, gave you the envelope, and you went to her place and found her dead. Three hours. She was killed between two and five this afternoon."

"Could have been a lot of traffic in that much time, Mr. Friedland."

"I doubt it. Not today. Today she was expecting a caller with a white envelope. William, you didn't see anyone on your way out of the building?"

"No, sir."

"Phone anyone? Speak to anyone?"

"Not a soul, Mr. Friedland, until I got here and asked the butler where you was."

"Good. You're always a good man, William."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I try to be." Which was no lie. I'm a hillbilly from near Comfort, North Carolina, which is back up in the mountains. It's a mighty poorly place, believe me. Mr. Friedland came up there one summer for a week of fishing. I worked for him that week, and when the week was over he said as how would I like to keep working for him. He said I was intelligent and clean-cut and had respect for other people. He said he needed a chauffeur and a man to do errands and personal chores. He said I would have quarters on a nice estate and steady pay. So naturally I jumped at the chance. That was near five years ago, and I'm glad to say that Mr. Friedland has come to depend on me as few folks can depend on a personal worker. He trusts me and knows I can keep my mouth shut. And that means a lot to a bigshot newspaper publisher and television station owner like Mr. Friedland.

While I was simmering down and losing the shakes from my experience in Miss Marla Scanlon's apartment, Mr. Friedland was busy on the phone. He called Judge Harrison Corday and Mr. Robert Grenick, who is the prosecuting attorney. They were both close friends of Mr. Friedland. He told them to drop everything, he had to see them right

away. He said a thing of utmost importance had happened which couldn't be talked about on the phone. He asked them to come to his study pronto, which they did.

Judge Corday got there first. He was one of the youngest superior court judges in the state. He liked parties and booze, and it was beginning to show around the softening edges of his face. He was a big, reddish man. He'd been a famous football star in college.

He said to Mr. Friedland, "What's up, Arch? I've got a dinner engagement and . . ."

"You may not want any dinner when you hear what I have to say," Mr. Friedland said. "To save a lot of repetitions, we'll wait until Bob Grenick arrives."

Judge Corday didn't press Mr. Friedland, knowing it would do no good. He sat down and lighted a dollar cigar and tried to read Mr. Friedland's lean, tight face:

Mr. Grenick showed up almost before Judge Corday got his cigar going good. Bald, chubby, and middle-aged, Mr. Grenick had thick, heavy lips and thick, heavy eyes. Both his lips and eyes always looked slightly damp, like a lizard's back that lives in a spring branch.

As soon as Mr. Grenick was in the study and the door safely closed, Mr. Friedland said, "Tell them, William, what you just told me."

"Miss Marla Scanlon is dead," I said.

The judge took it without blinking an eye. The state's attorney, Mr. Grenick, choked, put a hand to his neck, fumbled for a chair, and sat down.

"How?" Judge Corday said, cool.

"Murdered, I reckon," I said.

Mr. Grenick made noises like he was having a hard time getting air.

"By what means?" the judge asked.

"Choked to death, it looked like," I said.

"When?"

"Sometime between two and five," Mr. Friedland put in.

"What makes you think I have any interest until the murderer is caught and I act in official capacity?" Mr. Grenick said raggedly. "I hardly knew Marla Scanlon."

"Oh, come off it, Bob," Mr. Friedland said. "Marla Scanlon worked artfully and most skillfully. One by one she compromised the three of us. She didn't stretch her luck. We three were enough. She had her

gold mine. She was content. She didn't intend to incur further risk by developing, in a manner of speaking, a source of silver."

Mr. Grenick got half out of his chair, gripping its arms. "I deny any . . ."

"Please shut up," Mr. Friedland said quietly. "None of us is on trial, not yet. But we're the three who might have killed her. It's reasonably certain that one of us did. She's milked you the longest, Harrison. I was next. Bob, you're her third and final golden goose. Between us, we've contributed, over a period of time, something like a total of sixty thousand dollars."

"Too bad we never reported all that stashed cash to the income tax people," Judge Corday said. "They might have taken her off our backs."

"And the hides from our backs right along with her," Mr. Friedland said.

"How'd you find out all this?" Mr. Grenick asked. "About me, I mean?"

"That's a rather silly question, Bob," Mr. Friedland said. "I'm still a top reporter when it comes to digging out the facts. And I have the resources of a metropolitan newspaper at my disposal, don't forget."

"All right," Judge Corday said, like he was on the bench considering a motion by a lawyer. "It's laid out between us. We three were her patsys. Each had the same reason to dispose of her. We're cruising, in a word, in the same leaky boat. Now it remains to determine whether or not we have a paddle. Unfortunately, I have no alibi for the three hours between two and five this afternoon. Have you, Bob?"

"What?" Mr. Grenick was looking sort of gray, like a prospect for a dose of calomel.

"Where were you between two and five this afternoon?"

"I was . . ."

"Yes, Bob?" Mr. Friedland prompted.

Mr. Grenick lifted his eyes and looked at his friends. "I didn't go in, understand. A block away, I turned the car. I didn't go all the way to her apartment."

"You were going to see Marla?" the judge asked.

"Yes. I was going to appeal to her, to prove to her that I couldn't afford the blackmail tariff any longer. I was going to convince her that she'd have to be satisfied with less—or nothing more at all. I simply

couldn't rake up the money. I'm not as well heeled as you two."

"But you got cold feet," Mr. Friedland said. "You didn't actually see her?"

"That's right, Arch, and you've got to believe me."

"Whether or not we believe you," the judge said, "cuts little ice. The important thing is that you have no alibi. How about you, Arch?"

Mr. Friedland shook his head. "I got a call from her at two o'clock. She reminded me that William was due at five with a thousand dollars. I drove out for a quiet, private look at some acreage I may purchase. I came back in time to send William on his errand."

"So any one of us might have killed her," the judge said.

"Listen," Mr. Grenick said in a tight voice, "I didn't do it. But if a scandal of this sort brushes off on me, I'm ruined. The three of us," his eyes looked wetter than usual, "are ruined. There are too many people in city hall and police headquarters who'd like to collect our scalps. We can't hush up a thing as big as murder, not even if Arch does control the press and TV."

"Precisely," Mr. Friedland said. "Sometimes, Bob, you almost convince me you have a mind, in addition to the cunning you've shown in the political jungles. We cannot cover this thing."

"So what do you propose?" Judge Corday asked.

"An unbreakable gentleman's agreement," Mr. Friedland said. "Whichever of the three of us is nailed, he must bear the entire thing alone. He must not turn to his friends for help or implicate them in the slightest. He must stand firm on the statement that he, and only he, was involved with Marla Scanlon. Whichever of us is doomed will at least have the satisfaction of knowing that he shielded his friends."

"It might be rough," the judge said. "When a man's slapped in the face with murder, the natural reaction is to name others, to confuse the issue, to point suspicion elsewhere."

"I know," Mr. Friedland nodded, "and that's my reason for calling you here. We must decide in advance. We must agree that the two who escape will, throughout the future, stand by the loser's loved ones in any crisis, any trouble, as if the loser himself were still there."

"Mr. Friedland," I said.

He turned his head in my direction. "Yes, William?"

"All the time you been talking," I said, "I been thinking. I got an idear."

"William," Mr. Grenick said in a sore tone, "we've far more important things to consider than any ideas you . . ."

Mr. Friedland shut him up with a motion of his hand. "I don't think we have anything to lose by listening to you," Mr. Friedland said. "Go ahead, William."

"Thank you, sir: You see, Mr. Friedland, you've been real nice to me, giving me a chance to live like I never knowed people live, when I was a hillbilly back up beyond Comfort, North Carolina."

Mr. Grenick groaned. "This is no time for asinine, emotional speeches."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Anyhow, I'm all through speechifying. I just wanted Mr. Friedland to know one of the reasons I'd be willing to do you-all the favor of standing trial for Miss Marla Scanlon's murder."

I had their attention now, believe me. Right then, you could have heard a mouse crossing the attic, only of course there wasn't none in Mr. Friedland's attic.

"William," Mr. Friedland said finally, "I'm touched. But I suspect that you haven't quite finished."

"No sir, Mr. Friedland. Not quite. All three of you have society wives and fine kids and fancy homes and just everything to make life good. You stand to lose a real passel. But me, I got nobody but myself. And I never before had a chance to get me a stake together."

"How much?" Judge Corday asked.

"Well, you been paying Miss Marla Scanlon plenty. One final payment—to me—will finish it for good. Just chip in five thousand dollars apiece, and I'll protect you all from the aftermath of this terrible thing."

"I won't do it," Mr. Grenick said, "not five thou—"

"Yes, Bob, I think you will," Mr. Friedland said. He eased his backside to the edge of his desk and brought his eyes back to me. "How do you propose to do it, William?"

"It ought to be simple as picking corn when the sun ain't hot," I said, "With your newspapers and TV on my side, and Judge Corday on the bench, and Mr. Grenick handling the case for the state, I ought to come off all right. I'll say that I had been hanky-pank with Marla Scanlon. I'll say she was giving me the boot. I'll say we got in a big fight and I lost my head and killed her without really meaning to. Nobody in this town really cares that she's gone, nobody to question or suspect

what you do. I figure the judge should give me about three years for manslaughter. I'll behave good and be on parole inside of a year."

"And then?" Judge Corday said.

"I'll just take my fifteen thousand and go back to Comfort," I said. "None of us has got to worry about any of the others going back on the contract, account of we're all in this together and we sink or swim together."

"William," Mr. Friedland said, "I think you've got a deal. How about it, friends?"

Both the judge and Mr. Grenick were quick to nod.

"I suggest," the judge said, "that you and William contrive to rehearse a bit in private, Bob."

"A good idea," the prosecutor said.

"And you've fine material to work with here," Mr. Friedland said. "You won't have to worry about William botching his part."

"Well, gentlemen," I said, "let's get finished up here with the practice questions and all, soon's we can. I reckon I ought to get to police headquarters in a reasonable time. It'll look better if I surrender myself and show them how sorry I am for what I done to that girl."

"Excellent, William, excellent," Mr. Friedland said.

I got to admit it looked pretty excellent to me too. I'd go back to Comfort a little over a year from now with over fifty thousand dollars, counting the fifteen thousand these men would cough up.

Miss Marla Scanlon, in life, had had an eye on the future. When I'd made her open the wall safe in her apartment before I strangled her I'd picked up a little over forty thousand.

Folks around Comfort, North Carolina, are all eligible for this poverty program the government is running. It'll sure be nice, going back and being the richest man in the whole durn town. The air is clean, the scenery eye-popping, the likker mellow, and the girls all corn-fed beauties. I might even hire myself a chauffeur and personal errand boy—only I'll make sure his name ain't William.



The Intangible Threat

by Joseph Payne Brennan

Late one gray and overcast afternoon, some years ago, I was visiting my investigator friend, Lucius Leffing, at seven Autumn Street. Conversation had faltered and presently we sat in silence as a cold November wind rattled the windows.

Leffing remained hunched in his favorite chair, an expression of brooding melancholy on his face. There were times when the tedium of mere existence weighed on him heavily. On such occasions he would lapse into silence and unsociability. Though I had learned to endure my friend's black moods, I dreaded them.

With rare exceptions, only two events could scatter the gloom: the promise of an interesting case, or the discovery and acquisition of some treasured bit of Victoriana—a Carder's bowl, a prized paperweight, or even a photograph taken before the turn of the century.

But Leffing's finances had not permitted any recent purchases from the local antique shops, and there had been no case of consequence to engage his attention.

I was about to leave when the doorbell rang. Leffing arose with a listless air and crossed to the entrance hall. I heard an earnest feminine voice; a moment later my friend ushered in an attractive young woman whom he introduced as Miss Eunice Armiston.

Miss Armiston, whom I judged to be in her mid-twenties, had the type of face which used to be described as "a sweet oval"; it was flawlessly symmetrical and delicate, but marred now by a deep frown of worry or apprehension.

When we were seated, she spread her coat across the back of her chair and leaned forward.

"Recently, a friend of mine, Mrs. Julia Newington, mentioned that

you had helped her some years ago when a family problem arose which threatened to explode into scandal. She had the highest praise for your discretion and for your dispatch in resolving the difficulty."

Leffing nodded. "I recall the case quite well. The problem required rather delicate handling but I was fortunate enough to settle matters." He glanced at me. "You will not remember the case, Brennan; it took place before your advent." He then turned back towards our lovely visitor. "And now you have a problem, Miss Armiston?"

"I am worried about my aunt," she said. "I did not go to the police because I dread publicity, and also because there is so little really tangible to report. Under the circumstances, you were the first person who came to mind."

"What is the problem then?"

"I am convinced that my aunt's life is in danger!"

Leffing's angular face assumed an expression of interest and expectancy. "From what source, Miss Armiston?"

Our client hesitated briefly and then plunged ahead. "From my cousin, that is, from my aunt's adopted child, Ronald Bladell. He is actually no relation to me at all. He was the illegitimate son of my aunt's maid. When the maid unexpectedly died, leaving the infant, my aunt felt sorry for him and took out adoption papers. He was always a problem child. Now that he is grown, he preys on my aunt for money. She is quite wealthy, you know—Mrs. Frederick Bladell. Her husband died when he was young, but he left her the Bladell mining properties."

Leffing nodded. "I have heard of the Bladell holdings. Continue, Miss Armiston. What were the exact circumstances which brought you here? Ronald Bladell threatened your aunt?"

Eunice Armiston's frown deepened. "Well, not *directly*. They had a serious quarrel after lunch, but they patched it up and afterwards Ronald was as sweet as honey. That's what worries me, it's so out of character! And then, as he was leaving the house afterwards, I heard him mumbling to himself as he came down the porch steps. I was in the garden but he didn't see me. I couldn't hear what he said very clearly but one phrase did come through. He muttered, 'I'll fix the old witch'! It made my blood run cold. And there was a look of pure hatred, pure evil, on his face as he said it. I am positive he means to harm my aunt!"

"He would benefit by her death?" Leffing inquired.

"Yes, my aunt has remembered him in her will—generously."

Leffing sat without speaking for a few minutes. "While I have great respect for feminine intuition, Miss Armiston," he said finally, "you must realize that we can scarcely take any action merely because of a muttered comment addressed to no one. Perhaps he mumbled, 'I'd like to fix the old witch!' Angry people often mumble threats which are afterwards forgotten. If all of them were successfully prosecuted for making menacing remarks, our jails would not hold them. Can you give us any details of the quarrel? Can you recall specifically what was said?"

Miss Armiston flushed. "I wasn't in the room. I suppose I, well, eavesdropped a bit. My aunt had just recently returned from a Florida vacation. When she refused to give Ronald money over and above his regular allowance—he is twenty-three, Mr. Leffing—he became abusive. He said she had no right to be down in Florida spending money while he was 'slaving away'. Actually, he has an undemanding job as assistant gardener at the local Botanical Experiment Bureau. The hours are short and the work is light, but he doesn't earn enough for liquor, women and gambling. And my aunt's allowance—generous under the circumstances—even when added to his pay, isn't enough to meet his extravagances either. He accused my aunt of being miserly and selfish. Finally, when he saw that insults had no effect, he apologized and became very contrite. He overdid it so, it was sickening. My aunt must have known it was all a pose, but she was very fond of him at one time and she permitted him to make up."

She paused, biting her lip. "After the argument, he couldn't do enough. He cleaned up some chores which have been neglected because both cook and the yard man have been ill. He carried out trash, burned leaves, ground up a supply of fresh coffee and so on. Well, afterwards, my aunt softened a little in spite of herself. But she didn't give him any money. That was when he left the house muttering that threat, and with that horrible, gloating, venomous look on his face!"

"Possibly," I suggested, "he was gloating because he had managed to gloss over the argument so deftly."

Eunice Armiston shook her head. "No, it wasn't that. I know him too well. I am certain he is planning something malicious, something deadly!"

Leffing frowned. "Did he at any time during the argument hint at anything he might do—in the nature of revenge?"

"No, he didn't."

"And you can think of no specific circumstance or incident which gives solid ground to your apprehension?"

Miss Armiston looked miserable. "Just the argument and that mumbled threat!"

"I fear we have no case, Miss Armiston. As I said before, if people were arrested for muttering threats to themselves, most of us would be imprisoned at one time or another."

"Well, I *hate* him," she burst out passionately. "The little sneak thief! He's capable of anything! Even murder!"

Anger enhanced Eunice Armiston's attractiveness. Her flushed face, flashing eyes and aura of scornful animation fascinated me.

But all this was lost on Leffing. He pondered her words in his usual clinical fashion. "You use the term 'sneak thief,' Miss Armiston. Is your aunt's adopted son a thief?"

"We have no proof, but in my opinion he is. A number of items have turned up missing after one of his visits. Today after he left, my aunt missed a necklace which she had brought back from Florida. It was on a table in the room where the argument took place. My aunt shrugged it off, pretending that it was probably mislaid and will turn up later, but I think she knows that Ronald took it. I've always felt, Mr. Leffing," she added, "that a thief is capable of anything!"

Leffing nodded. "You may be right, Miss Armiston. Was the necklace of much value?"

Our client shook her head. "Oh, no. It was just one of those colorful seed necklaces they make and sell in the South. Its value is negligible. But my aunt was annoyed. I believe she bought the necklace as a present for a little girl who lives next door."

Leffing placed his fingertips together. "Why would Ronald Bladell steal a seed necklace? Surely he must have known it was virtually valueless."

Miss Armiston shrugged. "I suppose it was just an impulse. Light-fingered people will pick up anything, I understand. It becomes a habit with them."

Leffing frowned. "Miss Armiston, can you describe the necklace in any detail?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Well, since I attached little importance to it, I did not observe it in much detail. But let me see. The beads, or seeds I suppose I should say, were bright red and shiny with black at one end, a sort of tiny black cap. Actually; strung together, they were quite eye-catching."

Abruptly, Leffing arose from his chair. "At what time does your aunt have dinner?"

She gazed up at him in mounting confusion. "At quarter to six. But why do you ask, Mr. Leffing?"

He ignored her question. "You must telephone your aunt at once and insist that dinner be delayed until you have returned. We will accompany you."

Miss Armiston glanced at her watch. "It is too late to telephone now. It is already after five. But why—"

Leffing seemed unaccountably agitated. "Too late, you say? 'After five'? Please explain yourself, Miss Armiston! Isn't that unusual?"

Eunice Armiston blushed again. "My aunt is—a bit eccentric, I'm afraid. From five until seven the telephone bell is disconnected. My aunt will not be disturbed by telephone calls either just before or after her dinner. It is a great inconvenience to her friends, but she will not change her habits."

Leffing stared at her. "Great heavens!" Then, swiftly, he turned to me. "Brennan, you drove here?"

I nodded.

He started toward the door. "Quickly, then! There is not a moment to lose! Miss Armiston will give us her aunt's address!"

Three minutes later we were in the tangle of five o'clock traffic. When Miss Armiston revealed that her aunt lived in Bethany Woods, I realized every minute would count:

As seems inevitable under urgent circumstances, traffic lights, slow-moving trucks and tortoise-like drivers conspired against us. Leffing remained silent for some time, but as I glanced at his rigid face, I knew he was all but bursting with frantic impatience.

As we approached our fourth red light, he looked quickly along both ways of the intersecting street. "Go through it, Brennan!", he instructed. "Go through it!"

I shot through and began to make better time. I have only a kaleidoscopic memory of that drive. I know that I went through several

more red lights and that as I neared the end of Whalley Avenue, approaching Woodbridge, I saw the flashing lights of a police car in my rear-view mirror. I pressed the accelerator almost to the floor.

The speedometer hit seventy, but the police car gained. Slowing for the curves, I held at about sixty.

The police car shot alongside as we neared Bethany. I considered making one final break but thought better of it and pulled over.

By the time the police driver got out of his car, Leffing was already holding out identification which certified that he was legally authorized to act in the capacity of private detective. He spoke rapidly as the officer examined the card.

Suddenly the police driver nodded, hurried back to his car and roared away ahead of us, siren wailing, lights flashing.

Our escort knew the location of the Bladell property. We pulled up behind him in front of a stately Georgian mansion, screened by blue spruce and cedars.

We ran up a curving flagstone path to the porticoed porch. Leffing pressed the bell but Miss Armiston shook her head and fumbled in her handbag. "Disconnected," she explained. "Five to seven."

A moment later she found the key and led us into an entrance hall.

"The dining room?" Leffing inquired.

"Straight ahead," Eunice Armiston told him.

He literally ran past us. We arrived in the dining room just in time to witness a bizarre incident.

A grey-haired matriarch, majestic in her outraged dignity, had risen from her seat at the table, a coffee cup still lifted in one hand.

"What is the explanation of this intrusion?" she demanded.

In response, Leffing literally leaped across the room and knocked the coffee cup from her hand. The cup crashed to the floor, splattering coffee in every direction.

Mrs. Bladell stared at the shattered cup. Then she lifted her eyes and caught sight of the police car driver. "Officer, arrest this maniac!"

Leffing bowed courteously. "My sincere apologies, Mrs. Bladell. But had you drunk that cup of coffee, it might have been your last. A chemical analysis, I believe, will reveal abrin, one of the deadliest poisons known!"

Mrs. Bladell looked down at the spilled coffee seeping into the rug. "Abrin? How did it get into my coffee, then? And who are you?"

Leffing introduced himself. "Did you ever find your missing necklace, Mrs. Bladell?"

She shook her head. "No. But what on earth?"

"Just this, Mrs. Bladell," Leffing explained, "the necklace, as it was described to me by your niece, consisted of jequirity peas strung together. The jequirity was introduced into Florida where the seeds are used to make bead jewelry of various kinds. The jequirity, or crabs-eye pea, is pretty and colorful, but unfortunately these bright seeds contain abrin, a toxic poison. A single seed contains enough poison to kill an adult."

We all stood staring in astonishment as he continued.

"I fear, Mrs. Bladell," he went on, "that your adopted son, probably as a result of his work at the local Botanical Experiment Bureau, was aware of the toxic content of jequirity seeds. Your niece indicated that Ronald may have stolen the necklace. I did not immediately fathom the implications of this until I suddenly recalled that Miss Armiston had also mentioned that Ronald had ground up fresh coffee for you early this afternoon. I am convinced the missing necklace, sans string and clasp, disappeared into the coffee grinder, Mrs. Bladell!"

A subsequent analysis of the remaining ground coffee confirmed Leffing's belief. The coffee contained enough abrin to kill twenty people.

As Leffing and I sat discussing the case some nights later, between sips of my friend's choice cognac, I sighed and shook my head. "Your powers continue to confound me," I admitted, "but *must* you be so melodramatic, Leffing?"

"Melodramatic, Brennan? How so?"

"Well, hang it all, did you *have* to dash that cup out of the old lady's hand? Couldn't you have, well, just told her not to drink it?"

Leffing glanced around his Victorian gaslit living room with an air of deep contentment. "My dear Brennan," he replied, settling back in his beloved chair, "one can never take chances with a strong-willed old lady. Had I not dashed the cup from her hand, Mrs. Bladell, in spite of my warning, perhaps *because* of it, might have perversely swallowed the coffee on the spot! I have known these things to happen."

I was not convinced. Leffing's tendency to dramatize situations is one of his incurable faults. But I said no more. When one is drinking a friend's twenty-year-old, cask-mellowed cognac, one must not dwell unduly on his foibles.

The Cost of Kent Castwell

by Avram Davidson

Clem Goodhue met the train with his taxi. If old Mrs. Merriman were aboard he would be sure of at least one passenger. Furthermore, old Mrs. Merriman had somehow gotten the idea that the minimum fare was a dollar. It was really seventy-five cents, but Clem had never been able to see a reason for telling her that. However, she was not aboard that morning. Sam Wells was. He was coming back from the city—been to put in a claim to have his pension increased—but Sam Wells wouldn't pay five cents to ride any distance under five miles. Clem disregarded him.

After old Sam a thin, brown-haired kid got off the train. Next came a girl, also thin and also brown-haired, who Clem thought was maybe the kid's teenage sister. Actually, it was the kid's mother.

After *that* came Kent Castwell.

Clem had seen him before, early in the summer. Strangers were not numerous in Ashby, particularly strangers who got ugly and caused commotions in bars. So Clem wouldn't forget him in a hurry. Big, husky fellow. Always seemed to be sneering at something. But the girl and the kid hadn't been with him then.

"Taxi?" Clem called.

Castwell ignored him, began to take down luggage from the train. But the young girl holding the kid by the hand turned and said, "Yes—just a minute."

"Where to?" Clem asked, when the luggage was in the taxi.

"The old Peabody place," the girl said. "You know where that is?"

"Yes. But nobody lives there any more."

"Somebody does now. Us." The big man swore as he fiddled with the handle of the right-hand door. It was tied with ropes. "Why don't

you fix this thing or get a new one?"

"Costs money," Clem said. Then, "Peabody place? Have to charge you three dollars for that."

"Let's go dammit, let's go!"

After they'd started off, Castwell said, "I'm giving you two bucks. Probably twice what it's worth, anyway."

Half-turning his head, Clem protested. "I told you, mister, it was three."

"And I'm telling you, mister," Castwell mimicked the driver's New England accent, "that I'm giving you two."

Clem argued that the Peabody place was far out. He mentioned the price of gas, the bad condition of the road, the wear on the tires. The big man yawned. Then he used a word which Clem rarely used himself, and never in the presence of women and children. But this young woman and child didn't seem to notice.

"Stop off at Nickerson's Real Estate Office," Castwell said.

Levi P. Nickerson, who was also the County Tax Assessor, said, "Mr. Castwell. I assume this is Mrs. Castwell?"

"If that's your assumption, go right ahead," said Kent. And laughed.

It wasn't a pleasant laugh. The woman smiled faintly, so L.P. Nickerson allowed himself an economical chuckle. Then he cleared his throat. City people had odd ideas of what was funny. Meanwhile, though—

"Now, Mr. Castwell. About this place you're renting. I didn't realize—you didn't mention—that you had this little one, here."

Kent said, "What if I didn't mention it? It's my own business. I haven't got all *day*—"

Nickerson pointed out that the Peabody place stood all alone, isolated, with no other house for at least a mile and no other children in the neighborhood. Mrs. Castwell—if, indeed, she *was*—said that this wouldn't matter much, because Kathie would be in school most of the day.

"School. Well, that's it, you see. The school bus, in the first place, will have to go three miles off what's been its regular route to pick up your little girl. And that means the road will have to be plowed regular—snow gets real deep up in these parts, you know. Up till now, with nobody living in the old Peabody place, we never had to bother with the road. Now, this means," and he began to count off on his fin-

gers, "first, it'll cost Ed Westlake, he drives the school bus, more than he figured on when he bid for the contract; second, it'll cost the County to keep your road open. That's besides the cost of the girl's schooling, which is third."

Kent Castwell said that was tough, wasn't it? "Let's have the keys; Nick," he said.

A flicker of distaste at the familiarity crossed the real estate man's face. "You don't seem to realize that all this extra expense to the County isn't covered by the tax assessment on the Peabody place," he pointed out. "Now, it just so happens that there's a house right on the outskirts of town become available this week. Miss Sarah Beech passed on, and her sister, Miss Lavinia, moved in with their married sister, Mrs. Calvin Adams. 'Twon't cost *you* any more, and it would save us considerable."

Castwell, sneering, got up. "What! Me live where some old-maid landlady can be on my neck all the time about messing up her pretty things? Thanks a lot. No thanks." He held out his hand. "The keys, kid. Gimme the keys."

Mr. Nickerson gave him the keys: Afterwards he was to say, and to say often, that he wished he'd thrown them into Lake Amastanquit, instead.

The income of the Castwell menage was not large and consisted of a monthly check and a monthly money order. The check came on the fifteenth, from a city trust company, and was assumed by some to be inherited income. Others argued in favor of its being a remittance paid by Castwell's family to keep him away. The money order was made out to Louise Cane, and signed by an army sergeant in Alaska. The young woman said this was alimony, and that Sergeant Burndall was her former husband. Tom Tally, at the grocery store, had her sign the endorsement twice, as Louise Cane and as Louise Castwell. Tom was a cautious man.

Castwell gave Louise a hard time, there was no doubt about that. If she so much as walked in between the sofa, on which he spent most of his time, and the television, he'd leap up and belt her. More than once both she and the kid had to run out of the house to get away from him. He wouldn't follow, as a rule, because he was barefooted, as a rule, and it was too much trouble to put his shoes on.

Lie on the sofa and drink beer and watch television all afternoon, and hitch into town and drink bar whiskey and watch television all evening—that was Kent Castwell's daily schedule. He got to know who drove along the road regularly, at what time, and in which direction, and he'd be there, waiting. There was more than one who could have dispensed with the pleasure of his company, but he'd get out in the road and wave his arms and not move until the car he got in front of stopped.

What could you do about it? Put him in jail?

Sure you could.

He hadn't been living there a week before he got into a fight at the Ashby Bar.

"Disturbing the peace, using profane and abusive language, and resisting arrest—that will be ten dollars or ten days on each of the charges," said Judge Paltiel Bradford. "And count yourself lucky it's not more. Pay the Clerk."

But Castwell, his ugly leer in no way improved by the dirt and bruises on his face, said, "I'll take jail."

Judge Bradford's long jaw set, then loosened. "Look here, Mr. Castwell, that was just legal language on my part. The jail is closed up. Hasn't been anybody in there since July." It was then November. "It would have to be heated, and illuminated, and the water turned on, and a guard hired. To say nothing of feeding you. Now, I don't see why the County should be put to all that expense on your account. You pay the Clerk thirty dollars. You haven't got it on you, take till tomorrow. Well?"

"I'll take the jail."

"It's most inconvenient—"

"That's too bad, Your Honor."

The judge glared at him. Gamaliel Coolidge, the District Attorney, stood up. "Perhaps the Court would care to suspend sentence," he suggested. "Seeing it is the defendant's first offense."

The Court did care. But the next week Kent was back again, on the same charge. Altogether the sentence now came to sixty dollars, or sixty days. And again Castwell chose jail.

"I don't generally do this," the judge said, fuming. "But I'll let you pay your fine off in installments. Considering you have a wife and child."

"Uh-uh. I'll take jail."

"You won't like the food!" warned His Honor.

Castwell said he guessed the food would be up to the legal requirements. If it wasn't, he said, the State Board of Prison Inspectors would hear about it.

Some pains were taken to see that the food served Kent during his stay in jail was beyond the legal requirements—if not much beyond. The last time the State Board had inspected the County Jail it had cost the tax-payers two hundred dollars in repairs. It was costing them quite enough to incarcerate Kent Castwell, as it was, although the judge had reduced the cost by ordering the sentences to run concurrently.

All in all, Kent spent over a month in jail that winter, at various times. It seemed to some that whenever his money ran out he let the County support him, and let the woman and child fend for themselves. Tom Talley gave them a little credit at the store. Not much.

Ed Westlake, when he bid again for the school bus contract, added the cost of going three miles out of his way to pick up Kathie. The County had no choice but to meet the extra charge. It was considered very thoughtless of Louise to wait till *after* the contract was signed before leaving Castwell and going back to the city with her child. The side road to the Peabody place didn't have to be plowed so often, but it still had to be plowed *some*. That extra cost, just for one man! It was maddening.

It almost seemed—no, it *did* seem—as if Kent Castwell was deliberately setting himself in the face of New England respectability and thrift. The sacred words, "Eat it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without," didn't mean a thing to him. He wasn't just indifferent. He was hostile.

Ashby was not a thriving place. It had no industries. It was not a resort town, being far from sea and mountains alike, with only the shallow, muddy waters of Lake Amastanquit for a pleasure spot. Its thin-soiled farms and meager woodlots produced a scanty return for the hard labor exacted. The young people continued to leave. Kent Castwell, unfortunately, showed no signs of leaving.

All things considered, it was not surprising that Ashby had no artists' colony. It *was* rather surprising, then, that Clem Goodhue, meeting

the train with his taxi, recognized Bob Laurel at once as an artist. When asked afterwards how he had known, Clem looked smug, and said that he had once been to Provincetown.

The conversation, as Clem recalled it afterwards, began with Bob Laurel's asking where he could find a house which offered low rent, peace and quiet, and a place to paint.

"So I recommended Kent Castwell," Clem said. He was talking to Sheriff Erastus Nickerson (Levi P.'s cousin) at the time.

"Peace and *quiet*?" the sheriff repeated. "I know Laurel's a city fellow, and an artist, but, still and all—"

They were seated in the bar of the Ashby House, drinking their weekly small glass of beer. "I looked at it this way, Erastus," the taxi-man said. "Sure, there's empty houses all around that he could rent. Suppose *he*—this artist fellow—suppose *he* picks one off on the side road with nobody else living on it? Suppose *he* comes up with a wife out of somewhere, and suppose *she* has a school-age child?"

"You're right, Clem."

"Course I'm right. Bad enough for the County to be put to all that cost for *one* house, let alone two."

"You're right, Clem. But will he stay with Castwell?"

Clem shrugged. "That I can't say. But I did my best."

Laurel stayed with Castwell. He really had no choice. The big man agreed to take him in as lodger and to give over the front room for a studio. And, holding out offers of insulating the house, putting in another window, and who knows what else, Kent Castwell persuaded the unwary artist to pay several months' rent in advance. Needless to say, he drank up the money and did nothing at all in the way of the promised improvements.

Neither District Attorney Gamaliel Coolidge nor Sheriff Nickerson, nor, for that matter, anyone else, showed Laurel much sympathy. He had grounds for a civil suit, they said; nothing else. It should be a lesson to him not to throw his money around in the future, they said.

So the unhappy artist stayed on at the old Peabody place, buying his own food and cutting his own wood, and painting, painting, painting. And all the time he knew full well that his leering landlord only waited for him to go into town in order to help himself to both food and wood.

Laurel invited Clem to have a glass of beer with him more than once, just to have someone to tell his troubles to. Besides stealing his

food and fuel, Kent Castwell, it seemed, played the TV at full blast when Laurel wanted to sleep; if it was too late for TV, he set the radio to roaring. At moments when the artist was intent on delicate brushwork, Castwell would decide to bring in stove-wood and drop it on the floor so that the whole house shook.

"He talks to himself in that loud, rough voice of his," Bob Laurel complained. "He has a filthy mouth. He makes fun of my painting. He—"

"I tell you what it is," Clem said. "Kent Castwell has no consideration for others. That's what it is. Yep."

Bets were taken in town, of a ten-cent cigar per bet, on how long Laurel would stand for it. Levi Nickerson, the County Tax Assessor, thought he'd leave as soon as his rent was up. Clem's opinion was that he'd leave sooner. "Money don't mean that much to city people," he pointed out.

Clem won.

When he came into Nickerson's house, Levi, who was sitting close to the small fire in the kitchen stove, wordlessly handed over the cigar. Clem nodded, put it in his pocket. Mrs. Abby Nickerson sat next to her husband, wearing a man's sweater. It had belonged to her late father, whose heart had failed to survive the first re-election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and it still had a lot of wear left in it. Abby was unraveling old socks, and winding the wool into a ball. "Waste not, want not," was her motto—as well as that of every other old-time local resident.

On the stove a kettle steamed thinly. Two piles of used envelopes were on the table. They had all been addressed to the Tax Assessor's office of the County, and had been carefully opened so as not to mutilate them. While Clem watched, Levi Nickerson removed one of the envelopes from its place on top of the uncovered kettle. The mucilage on its flaps loosened by steam, it opened out easily to Nickerson's touch. He proceeded to refold it and then reseal it so that the used outside was now inside; then he added it to the other pile.

"Saved the County eleven dollars this way last year," he observed. "Shouldn't wonder but what I don't make it twelve this year, maybe twelve-fifty." Clem gave a small appreciative grunt. "Where is he?" the Tax Assessor asked.

"Laurel?—In the Ashby Bar. He's all packed. I told him to stay put. I told them to keep an eye on him, phone me here if he made a move to leave."

He took a sheet of paper out of his pocket and put it on the table. Levi looked at it, but made no move to pick it up. To his wife he said, "I'm expecting Erastus and Gam Coolidge over, Mrs. Nickerson. County business. I expect you can find something to do in the front of the house while we talk."

Mrs. Levi nodded. Even words were not wasted.

A car drove up to the house.

"That's Erastus," said his cousin. "Gam should be along—he is along. Might've known he wouldn't waste gasoline; came with Erastus."

The two men came into the kitchen. Mrs. Abby Nickerson arose and departed.

"Hope we can get this over with before nightfall," the sheriff said. "I don't like to drive after dark if I can help it. One of my headlights is getting dim, and they cost so darned much to replace."

Clem cleared his throat. "Well, here 'tis," he said, gesturing to the paper on the table. "Laurel's confession. Tell the sheriff and the D.A. that I'm ready to give myself up," he says. "I wrote it all down here," he says. Happened about two o'clock this afternoon, I guess. Straw that broke the camel's back. Kent Castwell, he was acting up as usual. Stomping and swearing out there at the Peabody place. Words were exchanged. Laurel left to go out back," Clem said, delicately, not needing to further comment on the Peabody place's lack of indoor plumbing. "When he come back, Castwell had taken the biggest brush he could find and smeared paint over all the pictures Laurel had been working on. Ruined them completely."

There was a moment's silence. "Castwell had no call to do that," the sheriff said. "Destroying another man's property. They tell me some of those artists get as much as a hundred dollars for a painting. . . . What'd he do then? Laurel, I mean."

"Picked up a piece of stovewood and hit him with it. Hit him hard."

"No doubt about his being dead, I suppose?" the sheriff asked.

Clem shook his head. "There was no blood or anything on the wood," he added. "Just another piece of stove wood. . . . But he's dead, all right."

After a moment Levi Nickerson said, "His wife will have to be notified. No reason why the County should have to pay burial expenses. Hmm. I expect she won't have any money, though. Best get in touch with those trustees who sent Castwell his money every month. *They'll pay.*"

Gamaliel Coolidge asked if anyone else knew. Clem said no. Bob Laurel hadn't told anyone else. He didn't seem to want to talk.

This time there was a longer silence.

"Do you realize how much Kent Castwell cost this County, one way or the other?" Nickerson asked.

Clem said he supposed hundreds of dollars. "Hundreds and *hundreds* of dollars," Nickerson said.

"*And,*" the Tax Assessor went on, "do you know what it will cost us to try this fellow—for murder in any degree or manslaughter?"

The District Attorney said it would cost thousands. "Thousands and *thousands* . . . and that's just the trial," he elaborated. "Suppose he's found guilty and appeals? We'd be obliged to fight the appeal. More thousands. And suppose he gets a new trial? We'd have it to pay all over again.

Levi P. Nickerson opened his mouth as though it hurt him to do so. "What it would do to the County tax-rate . . ." he groaned. "Kent Castwell," he said, his voice becoming crisp and definite, "is not worth it. He is just not *worth* it."

Clem took out the ten-cent cigar he'd won, sniffed it. "My opinion," he said, "it would have been much better if this fellow Laurel had just packed up and left. Anybody finding Castwell's body would assume he'd fallen and hit his head. But this confession, now—"

Sheriff Erastus Nickerson said reflectively, "I haven't read any confession. You, Gam? You, Levi? No. What you've told us, Clem, is just hearsay. Can't act on hearsay. Totally contrary to all principles of American law . . . Hmm. Mighty nice sunset." He arose and walked over to the window. His cousin followed him. So did District Attorney Coolidge. While they were looking at the sunset Clem Goodhue, after a single glance at their backs, took the sheet of paper from the kitchen table and thrust it into the kitchen stove. There was a flare of light. It quickly died down. Clem carefully reached his hand into the stove, took out the small corner of the paper remaining, and lit his cigar with it.

The three men turned from the window.

Levi P. Nickerson was first to speak. "Can't ask any of you to stay to supper," he said. "Just a few leftovers is all we're having. I expect you'll want to be going on your way."

The two other County officials nodded.

The taxi-man said, "I believe I'll stop by the Ashby Bar. Might be someone there wanting to catch the evening train. Night, Levi. Don't turn on the yard light for us."

"Wasn't going to," said Levi. "Turning them on and off, that's what burns them out. Night, Clem, Gam, Erastus." He closed the door after them. "Mrs. Nickerson," he called to his wife, "you can come and start supper now. We finished our business."



My Unfair Lady

by Guy Cullingford

I was sitting in a nook in the woods reading a paperback, when this little girl parted the leaves and looked in at me. At first sight she seemed no better or worse than the usual run of small females, a set of indeterminate features framed in towy pigtailed which had a long way to go to reach her shoulders. She was wearing a fairly clean dress, bare legs and sandals.

"Excuse me, mister," she said, staring at me good and hard.

"Certainly," I said amiably. "But the wood's big enough for both of us, and I daresay we'll get on better at a distance."

I went on with my reading. And though I kept my eyes on the printed word, I could feel hers like a pair of gimlets boring into me.

"How about leaving me in peace?" I said. "Be a good girl."

She made no attempt to move. She was following her own line of thought, not mine. After a moment, she said, "There's a gentleman being unkind to a lady under that tree." And she turned a bit and pointed.

I felt myself getting hot under the collar, and I said, "That's none of my business or yours either. Run away home, you nasty prying little girl. I don't want to know you."

She stayed put, not budging an inch. For a full minute she remained silent, twisting one ankle round the other.

Then she said, "How'd you like it if someone stuck a knife into you?"

"What!" I leapt to my feet, slamming the book shut. "Why didn't you say that in the beginning? Where's this? What—what tree'd you say?"

She was off like a shot with me right after her. We went about twenty feet down the slope, and then the tail of the girl's little dress

vanished into a tangle of undergrowth. I scrambled after her. But when we got to the foot of the tree, I stopped short, silently staring.

There the woman lay, on last year's leaves with her head supported by a beech trunk. The knife must have found the heart, for she was just as dead as the leaves, although she hadn't been there as long. There's always something pretty shocking in sudden death, and she couldn't have been more than twenty. She must have been a good-looker too. The haft of the knife was still in place, and suddenly I felt sick at my stomach. I turned away to throw up and realized with a start that the kid who'd brought me there had vanished; she must have melted away while I was busy taking in the situation. I hadn't time to be sick. It suddenly dawned on me that I was in a serious position. That wretched little girl was as valuable to me as her weight in diamonds; she was my one and only alibi that I'd visited the scene of the crime and nothing more. So I had to find her again as soon as possible.

I bolted down the slope, right to the bottom where there was a kind of paddling pond crammed full of children. But though I darted here and there, and there were dozens of little girls, there wasn't a trace of the one I wanted. I tell you, I stood still, and the sweat trickled down my face. I suppose ten minutes elapsed before I gave up the search. Then I had to ask myself a question. What do I do now? I was all for racing away as fast as my legs would take me. If I'd had a hat I could have pulled down over my eyes, I don't think I should have hesitated to do that. But I was bare-headed, and I'd been behaving, in the light of later events, in what might well have been described as oddly by any interested onlooker. There were several mothers who must have spared a moment from watching Bobbie get his pants splashed on to make a mental note of my interest in little girls, perhaps were even ready to have a word with a policeman. And, by heaven, there was a policeman ready made for them, standing in the shade of the trees, no doubt presiding benignly over the frolics of the young, and all set to prevent any casualty amongst the waders.

I had a horrid vision of myself on the run—the man the police wanted to interview in connection with the murdered girl. Well, in the choice of evils it's my motto to choose the lesser. I headed for the policeman, as if in his stalwart frame lay my only hope of salvation.

"Officer," I said in a voice that broke with uncertainty, "Officer, I

want to report a crime."

That shook him. He was a youngish man, and he looked as if all his blood had suddenly drained into his boots. But he pulled himself together and asked me a few questions, and soon we were making it up the slope together, my heart pumping a great deal harder than was called for by the incline.

Of course, later on I got passed on to higher authority for questioning, first a detective sergeant and then an inspector, then both together. I stuck to my story, and they seemed to me to be decent fellows. They almost believed me.

What really rattled them was one of those fantastic coincidences which would be quite inadmissible in fiction. When the constable first bore me off to the police station, I was still clutching that confounded paperback, and when they took it off me, there on the cover, for them to see, was a blonde with a dagger in her heart. I hadn't even noticed the subject of the luridly painted cover until I had it pointed out to me. In the absence of any more substantial clue, blood or strands of hair or incriminating fingerprints, they had to make the most of that. In defence, I stuck to the little girl who had drawn me into my predicament; she was all I had.

"Pity you don't know her name," commented the inspector, a shade dryly I thought.

"I don't go round asking the names of strange little girls," I said. "I'm not fond enough of them for that."

The inspector nodded. "Mind you," he said, "if what you're telling us is the truth, there's no need to be alarmed. If the kid's above ground we'll find her, don't you worry."

"Then I'll not worry," I said.

"Lucky the schools haven't broken up," said the sergeant. "We'll go through them with a fine-tooth comb till we find her, that is . . ." He paused significantly and scratched his nose. I could see he wasn't convinced.

I got to know the sergeant quite well during the next twenty-four hours—and the local schools. As far as the children were concerned, our arrival was a welcome interruption, but the teachers were less approving. Finally, at Omega Road Girls' School we struck oil.

After a short talk with the headmistress, we were shown into a class-

room of the correct age group. There were about four and twenty little darlings present, with the one we were after practically indistinguishable from the rest—except to me. She was seated at a desk, second row from the front. We had been warned not to upset the little dears, so the sergeant in a voice flowing with milk and honey asked them if they'd any of them ever seen this gentleman (pointing to me) before anywhere. Up shot a forest of hands. Only one in the second row remained at desk level. You can guess whose.

"Where?" asked the sergeant.

"Pleasir, pleasir," they chanted in unison, and one being singled out by the head-mistress for a solo speech said, "Please, Ma'am, we all saw him at the paddling pool in Hammer Wood on the afternoon the young woman got done in."

The head-mistress shot me a frosty look, as if I should be held responsible for any psychic damage done to these innocents. At once I asked the sergeant for the privilege of half a minute's private conversation. We cowered behind the blackboard, and I whispered into his ear that the one who hadn't put up her hand was the one we were after. He emerged brushing his moustache, first one side, then the other, and said, "I want to ask the little girl in the second row who didn't put up her hand if she has ever seen this gentleman before."

"Speak up, Ruby Grant," said the head-mistress, cooing at the little wretch. "No one's going to hurt you, dear."

The child's indeterminate features registered no expression whatever. She took her time about it, studying me with a sort of vacant earnestness.

"I never seen him in me life, Miss Birch," she finally said. "I don't know that gentleman at all, and—" here the lips parted in a grin to disclose a set of tiny, regular teeth "—I don't know as I want to."

A giggle ran round the class, and Miss Birch did nothing to suppress it. Instead, she asked mildly, "You weren't at the pool with the others, then?"

"No, Miss Birch, Ruby wasn't at the pool with us," said a child who was seated behind Ruby Grant. "She said she had to go straight home."

"Is that right, Ruby?"

"Yes, Miss Birch. I wanted to look after me baby brother, so our mum could get a rest."

You could practically see the halo above that flaxen crown.

"I have always found Ruby a very truthful little girl," remarked Miss Birch, sotto voce to the sergeant.

That was that. I ask you, what could I do about it?

They had to let me go in the end, for there wasn't a shred of real evidence. They couldn't trace any connection between me and the murdered girl, and it wasn't any good bringing a prosecution on the strength of a lurid book jacket. Although I was told dozens of women volunteered to give information on my personal appearance down at the pool that afternoon. You know, the usual thing, the wild and glaring eyes, the maniacal frenzy, etcetera, etcetera. I never varied my story, however much opportunity I was given, and there was nothing known against me, and I was in steady employment.

As far as I could see, they would never nail anyone else for the wood-killing either. Like most of those girls who are found murdered, she was not known to have had any men friends. Apparently, she ran to type, quiet and reserved and self-respecting. Well, she was now, anyway, poor thing. The knife was of a common sort which might be found in the possession of any boy scout. Although it had been sharpened to a fine edge, there were no fingerprints on it. As for fallen leaves, they don't measure up to flower beds when it comes to holding the impression of a distinctive shoe heel. If I'd done the murder myself, I couldn't have made a neater job of it.

Finally, the C.I.D. had to admit themselves beaten, and I left the police station for the last time without a stain on my character. Huh! I lost my job, I lost my place of residence, I lost my friends. And, in addition to all this, no girl in that district would be seen dead with me. Though for weeks afterwards, had girls permitted me to escort them, they would have been the safest girls in the world. I never took a step without police protection, very, very unobtrusive. The smallest squeak would have brought the man on my tail to my side.

All the same, I wasn't moving from the neighborhood, not yet awhile. I found a fresh dwelling with a deaf mute for a landlady, a fresh job at half the pay, and there I stuck, waiting for time to pass which is reputedly a great healer.

But I was waiting with a purpose. When three months were up, I found myself alone again—without police protection, that is. Then I

thought it was safe to get busy. They say a child's memory is short, and I didn't want to leave it too long. I started to hang about the Omega Road Girls' School, at four o'clock when the kids were coming out. I marked my prey; three months had made very little difference to her, and I herded her off from the rest of the flock. As a matter of fact, it was as easy as pie because she left the others at a road junction and trailed off on her own. I guess it was like that the day at the pool; she was strictly an individualist. I had decided to use guile, and had been toting round with me for days a big bag of toffees.

"Hey, Ruby," I said, catching up with her and offering the bag. "Have a sweetie."

She recognized me at once. She didn't look scared at all, but she shook her head and said, "My mum says I'm never to take sweets from strangers."

"I'm not a stranger. I'm the man you nearly put behind bars for life, don't you remember?"

"Serves yer right. You shouldn't have spoken nasty to me."

Then she showed her teeth in the famous grin. You could see she didn't bear me an ounce of spite.

"Besides . . ." she said.

"Besides what?"

"I didn't want to get meself in trouble. I didn't want to draw attention to meself, see."

My God, she'd got it all there in her little brain-pan at the age of eight or thereabouts. She didn't care a fig what became of me; it was her own skin she was intent on preserving.

She undoubtedly knew who had killed the girl . . .

I tried not to show any excitement, and I said as casually as I could, matching my step to hers: "Then you saw the chap who did it. I thought it was one of your lies!"

"Don't be saucy. Of course I saw 'im. Leastways, I saw his back. He was bending over."

"You mean you never saw his face at all. Well, that's no good, you couldn't pick him out."

"I could and all, if I wanted to. Wears a blue suit."

"So does my Uncle Bert. What the hell! Why every—"

"You shouldn't swear. My mum says it's not nice."

"You and your mum! I'll tell you what your mum is, she's as big a

liar as you are if she says you were at home minding the baby when you were busy snooping at people in the wood."

"She can't keep her eye on the clock all the time, can she? Not with my young brother she can't. And I wasn't snooping, Mister Clever. I was playing 'ouses under the trees."

"And you say you know this chap?"

"I didden say I knew 'im. I said I could put my finger on 'im if I liked."

"Then why don't you?"

"It's none of my business." She brought it out with an air of secret triumph.

But it was my business all right, and my particular business to keep on baiting her until I got the response I wanted. I've often heard little girls doing it to each other, and nine times out of ten it works.

So I gathered my resources together and, packing all the scorn I could into my voice, said, "Huh! Ruby Grant, you don't know a thing!"

"I do."

"You're just making it up."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You never saw the chap at all, or if you did, you wouldn't know him from Adam."

"I told you 'e'd got blue clothes on."

"Well, where does he live?"

"I dunno were 'e lives, but I know where 'e is this minnit."

"You're a nasty story teller!"

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

I was thoroughly into the spirit of the thing, when she suddenly capitulated.

"If I take you to where he is, then will you believe me?"

"Now you're talking," I said. "You take me to him and I'll believe you."

She looked at me hard with that intent yet somehow vacant stare which was part of her make-up.

"If I do, will yer swear not to tell anyone?"

"Of course I will."

"Then say it after me."

"What is it? What have I got to say?"

She licked her grubby first finger and held it up in the air.

"See my finger's wet . . . go on and say it."

I licked my own finger and followed her instructions.

"See my finger's dry."

"See my finger's dry."

"Slit my throat if I tell a lie." Here she drew her finger ominously across her scraggy little throat.

I repeated the childish oath. I hadn't the faintest intention of sticking to it. I'd have been an outright fool if I considered I owed any allegiance to that child.

But my having taken the oath seemed to satisfy her. She said, "Come on, then."

She pranced off and I followed her as I'd done once before. The only difference was that now she wore a skimpy cloth coat and we were on the pavements and not in the path in the wood.

She led me from this by-road into another and yet another until at last we came out on the High Street. There were lots of people about shopping, but she didn't moderate her pace, but slipped between them like an eel, while I blundered after. I must have looked odd chasing after that scrap of a kid, as if life depended on it. But I wasn't conscious of making a fool of myself; my heart was thumping wildly, because I felt sure I was on to something important.

Finally, we came to the crossroads where the High Street joins the main arterial road coming from the city.

Ruby Grant came to a sudden standstill, which brought me right up on her heels.

She dropped back to my side, and looking up at me, gave the faintest flick to her thumb.

"There 'e is, then. What did I tell yer?"

There he was, with his back to us, blue suit, white gloves and all, directing the home-going traffic, the young cop I'd given myself up to that day in the wood, by the paddling pool.

I stood gazing stupidly at him, my mind in a whirl, for perhaps ten seconds. Then I turned to Ruby. You know what? The little devil wasn't there. She'd played the same trick on me as before. She must have moved like greased lightning.

It was hopeless to look for her amongst the crowd. A child as small as that could take cover anywhere. She might have darted into the

nearest chain store for temporary refuge, or be halfway home already.

So there I was, up a tree, I turned about and began to walk slowly back along the High Street, mechanically dodging the busy shoppers while I mulled what had happened over in my mind. Was Miss Ruby Gant stringing me along in her own inimitable fashion? And was this last audacity—pure invention on the spur of the moment—a final thumb at the nose at me, for venturing to criticize her past conduct?

Did her fiendish ingenuity prompt her to select a policeman as the supreme example of improbability? Was she even now giggling away at the idea of it?

Did she really know who had murdered the girl in the wood? Was the blue suit merely a product of her fertile fancy, or had it some basis in fact?

It was a matter beyond dispute that the cop had been right on the spot, or as near as makes no difference. It would have taken him less than no time to have slipped down the slope from the fatal tree into position as guardian of the pool. Just because no motive had come to light for the murder of the girl, it didn't follow that there was none.

When I was a boy I was never keen to tangle with the forces of law and order, and I could therefore imagine what effect the idea of mixing it with a policeman would have on one of Ruby's age and environment. You notice that I don't say tender age. Still, it was nice to think that there might be some reason for what that kid had done to me, besides the mere gratification of a childish spite.

Now that I harked back, I had a vivid mental picture of the blood draining out of the policeman's face when I first reported to him my discovery of the crime. Was every cop so squeamish, however inexperienced?

But even if Ruby had made me a present of the killer, what good was it likely to do me? I shouldn't like to see the expression on the sergeant's face if I'd be so foolish as to trot round to the police station with this new theory.

And suddenly I saw the whole thing from the point of view of the police, and knew myself that it was only a pack of lies, or rather, that mixture of truth and tarradiddle in which Ruby specialized.

Well, let bygones be bygones, I thought. Thanks to Ruby, I should always be a man with a past . . . no need to allow her to complicate my future.

I felt that I needed a drink to strengthen my resolution, even if it was only a strong black coffee, and as this feeling happened to coincide with my passing one of the local milk bars, I pushed the door and went in.

It was one of those narrow affairs like a tramcar, with tables in front and the works at the end. I was nearly up to the counter when I saw something that pulled me up dead.

There, perched up on a stool, with her back three-quarters-wise to me, was that demon-child. She had her skinny elbows planted on the counter, and her monkey paws round a beakerful of something.

But she wasn't drinking. She seemed to be in a sort of ecstasy, gazing up with rapt adoration at the face of the Adonis presiding over the counter. The man was sleek and dark and as handsome as a rattlesnake. You know the type.

There was a loud sort of buzzing noise in my ears. I stood perfectly still, and deep down inside me I had that sudden hideous conviction of truth without proof such as a chap gets sometimes.

I added my stare to Ruby's.

The man must have just finished buttering some slices of cut bread ready for sandwiches, because he still held the knife loosely in his right hand, whilst with the index finger of the left he was absentmindedly testing the sharpness of the blade.

He was not interested in either of us.

All his attention was centered on the pair of young girls who sat at the table next to the counter, chattering away together in the animated way girls have if within ten yards of any personable male. His eyes, half-narrowed, feasted on them as on some delectable prospect.

Then, as if drawn by a magnet, he released the knife, and came forward, brushing past the entranced Ruby, to collect their empty cups.

As he bent over them in his regulation short white jacket, murmuring who knows what sweet inducements, he revealed to me the back view of a pair of pants of a peculiarly revolting shade. I decided not to stop for refreshment.

I did a rightabout turn, and was out of those surroundings in less time than it takes to say "Blue Murder."

Oh yes, I agree there are loose ends. There are several things I should like to know myself.

For instance, just when did Mistress Ruby catch up with him?

Did she track him down systematically by his choice in suiting? Had she known him before? Or was it one of those odd chances, beginner's luck, as you might say?

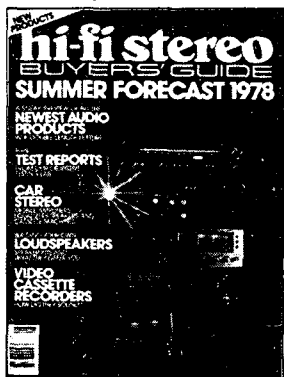
How long was he prepared to go on stuffing her up with free ice cream, hot chocolate and what have you, to keep her on his side?

And what was going to happen when he stopped?

Or when . . . well, never mind.

These questions, or any variants on same, are likely to go unanswered as far as I'm concerned.

When two tigers get together, that's no place for me.



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Vacation

by Mike Brett

The motel was a luxurious U-shaped structure of redwood, aluminum and glass, two stories tall, the second floor having a continuous balcony that overlooked an enormous swimming pool. Charles and Lisa Hannaford arrived at one P.M. by taxi from the airport. In the warmth of the January sun the guests romped around the pool and relaxed on tubular beach chairs. They wore shorts and halters and swimsuits. Laughter and gay conversation drifted toward the Hannafords.

It was a Florida playground, and already Charles was beginning to feel some of his business tensions lift. The pool looked inviting. He wanted to change into his swimsuit, take a dip, then spend the rest of the day taking the sun.

They were going to stay a week. Perhaps tomorrow he would try his hand at a little golf, or perhaps Lisa would like to go out on a boat with him for some deep-sea fishing.

Lisa caught his arm. "It's beautiful, Charles, isn't it?" she said, smiling.

"Yes, it's lovely." He never ceased to be amazed at her beauty. She was thirty-two now, and they had been married eight years. It was ten years since his first wife had died, and he had raised his two sons by himself until he had married Lisa. Twenty years older than Lisa, he was aware of her freshness and her enthusiasm, and the never-ending delight of looking at her.

In their room, they changed to swim suits, and he kissed her. "You're right again," he said. "I'm glad we came down here."

Taking the vacation had been her idea. He owned a real estate firm, a big one, and he worked hard. But lately the big deals had fallen through, and some of the smaller ones, too, had gone sour. He'd come

home tired and irritable. Competition had sprung up all round him over the years, and every day had been a battle.

It hadn't affected his love for Lisa, however. The wonder and the magic were still there for him. At night, alone in their bedroom, he had watched her brushing her long, black hair, and he knew she was the richness in his life.

But the strain of business had begun to take its toll from him. There were too many nights when he hadn't left the office until midnight. He smoked too much, he drank too many martinis, and he had put on too much weight.

The odds had been stacked heavily against their marriage from the beginning. Some of his best friends had warned him against marrying her. Of course, they had all been tactful. "You don't marry a girl with her background, Charlie," they had said. None of them had actually come right out and labeled her.

While driving over a bridge on his way home one rainy evening, he had seen her climb to the rail, poised to leap into the dark waters. She was twenty-four years old then, already so filled with her own feelings of futility that she no longer wanted to live.

But Charles Hannaford had seen something in the girl, had painstakingly gone about the business of convincing her she was a valuable human being, and had asked her to marry him. After much persuasion, he had convinced her that he was a very lonely man, and that she would indeed brighten his home.

A nice home, a small circle of friends (some hadn't accepted her) and the warm security of being truly loved by Charles Hannaford had made her a functioning human being. They'd had eight good years, and he thought she was lovelier than when he had married her.

Lisa had seen the pressure on him these last few months, and had insisted upon the vacation. The strain was there with good cause. He was fifty-two years old. The ugly specter of failure loomed before him. It didn't make sense to leave a business that was going bad, for pleasure. But now he was happy they had taken the vacation. Somehow. Lisa's optimism was contagious.

The trouble really started when they left their room for the pool. From the narrow balcony skirting the second floor of the motel, a blond giant of heroic dimensions called, "Lisa, honey!" then dove toward the pool. In those few seconds, Charles had seen a look of fear

come over Lisa's face.

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked. "You're as white as a sheet."

"No. I'm all right. I knew him, Charles. I spent some time in Florida, ten years ago. We can leave if you like," she added meaningfully. "I think it would be better if we did."

"No. We're staying. We don't run from anything, Lisa," he said gently.

The man in the pool climbed out, dripping water. He was tall and his muscles bulged, a weight lifter, a physical fitness man. With his long blond hair and his deeply tanned body, he might have been a Viking god.

He stepped up to Lisa as though he had seen her only yesterday, and placed his hand on her arm. "Lisa, honey! Where you been? I recognized you the minute I set eyes on you." He spoke to her, but his eyes measured Hannaford speculatively.

"This is my husband," she said quickly, and Charles detected the nervousness. "My husband, Charles Hannaford," emphasizing it. "I don't seem to remember your name," she said weakly.

Charles felt an emphatic reaction. He felt his wife's discomfort. This was the first time anything like this had occurred since they were married. Her past had come up out of nowhere. There was no running away now. The blond giant, standing before her, blocked the sunlight from her. His shadow covered her like an evil embrace.

The light-haired man stood with his feet spread apart and his hands on his hips, confidently. "It's natural, your forgetting my name, Lisa," he said and smiled. "I'm Bill Rennie. It's been a long time, and you knew a lot of people when you were down here. Got a cigarette?" he said casually.

Charles handed one to him and lit it for him.

Rennie stared at Lisa boldly. Then the thin lips smiled knowingly. "It's been a long time, but it sure is nice seeing you again. You look terrific, just terrific." His eyes swept over her body. He chuckled. "Put on a couple of pounds since I saw you last. I remember you as a real thin kid." He extended his hand to Charles. "You're a lucky man," he said. "Real lucky."

Charles could sense the mockery in his tone. "Thank you, I feel that way too."

Bill turned to Lisa. "Guess you were kind of surprised to see me

flying through the air like that. I get all the guests shook up every time they see it. They don't expect to see anybody flying down from up there." He winked at her. "Remember me, baby? I was always the high flier in the crowd."

"Yes," she said. "I remember you."

He pounded a large hand against his stomach. "Still in great shape." He pointed up to the balcony. "I got it made. I live up there, in room fifteen. I get up in the morning and I take off like a bird. Never have used the stairs to get down to the pool. That's strictly for tourists. We natives know better. How long you folks going to stick around?"

"A week," Charles said.

Lisa said quickly, "Perhaps a day."

"No," Bill said. "You'll stay longer than that. This is a terrific place. It'll take a week just to get comfortable." He glanced at Lisa again and said, "Mr. Hannaford, you sure picked yourself a winner."

"Yes, I think so," Charles agreed amiably.

Bill flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette. "Why don't you folks drop up to my place tonight? I'm having a party. Some of the locals and some of the tourists. We have a ball. You can come any way you like. Shorts, bathing suits, or evening dress—anything you like, as long as you're comfortable. Me, I wear swim trunks."

"I don't know," she said lamely. "I don't think we'll be able to make it. We've just come down and the long trip—"

"Oh, come on," Bill said cheerfully. "It'll be like old times, Lisa. We've got plenty to talk over, and you'll have a good time too, sir," he said to Charles.

"I'm sure I will," Hannaford replied. "We'll be there. Thank you, we'd like to come." Rennie's *sir* had made him feel older.

"Swell," said Bill. "We start around twelve o'clock. Don't do much sleeping around here, you know."

Charles watched Rennie's shoulders as he walked away, the deeply tanned body, the long blond hair, and the swaggering walk.

"I don't want to go," Lisa said very softly.

"We don't have to," he replied gently. "But I think we should."

Her face was flushed. "You saw him, you saw the way he looked at me."

He nodded his head slowly. "He's wrong. He's looking at something in the past."

"That's the way he remembers it." She touched his elbow. "We don't have to stay here, Charles. There are so many places where we can stay, with more privacy."

"One place isn't any different than the rest. The only important thing is you."

"Then let's get out of here, Charles. Honestly, I want to leave. Staying here is unfair to you." She turned her head away and her voice was very quiet. "I was dirt when I knew him. You heard him, and you saw the way he looked at me. He makes me feel dirty."

He shook his head. "We're staying." The knowing innuendoes in the man's tone still rankled.

"What are you trying to prove?" she asked angrily.

"Nothing, nothing at all. That's just the point. We don't have to prove anything."

"Thank you," she said, and he felt a pang of sympathy as she forced a smile. "He won't let up, Charles."

He shook his head soberly, a stocky, solid man. "He doesn't know with whom he's dealing. I do."

"I love you, Charles," she said simply. Then she ran from him, and he saw her body knife through the air as she dove into the pool. She was an excellent swimmer. He barely managed to stay afloat.

He went in after a while, for a few minutes, then came out and dried in the sun. He listened to the roar of conversation and laughter around the pool, the squealing horseplay of children, the exclamations of card players.

He stretched out on a beach chair and shut his eyes against the strong rays of the sun. A running child, dripping pool water, made him sit up. On the other side of the pool, he could see Lisa and Bill Rennie, side by side, dangling their legs in the water. The man was laughing, and even from this distance, across the pool, Charles could see a pained expression on Lisa's face.

Real brave man, Charles told himself, a hero. You're fifty-two years old, and you throw her right into the path of a guy who can put pressure on her.

He watched Lisa smile at Bill.

How smart are you, Hannaford? he asked himself. You've married her and you've already beaten the odds. What more do you want? But to turn and run now would be an admission of his lack of faith in her.

It would destroy what they had built up between them.

Later, they dined at the motel's restaurant, overlooking the pool, and she was quiet and thoughtful. The pool had been emptied of guests and a handyman was cleaning an oily film from the side of the pool with a big brush.

They strolled for a while after dinner, then went back to their room. They were both very tired, and she suggested they take a nap. He went to bed. He heard her moving about in the room, then he heard the soft murmuring of the shower. A little while later, he heard her come out of the shower, and she sat down and brushed her hair.

Charles fell asleep. He awakened to darkness and the steady hum of the air conditioner. He was alone. Lisa was gone. He could feel the acceleration of his heartbeat. He lay there in an agony of torment.

Then he heard the key in the lock. Without knowing why, he shut his eyes and pretended he was asleep. She came into the room stealthily, taking one slow step after another. He felt the bed give as she lay down beside him, and then he heard her quick breathing. In the darkness of the room, he felt sick.

After a while she got up and dressed. He must have dozed off again, he realized, when she shook him and awakened him. It was a quarter to twelve.

She was wearing a shimmering white evening dress. Her hair was beautifully combed. Her neck was white and strong, and her lips were full and red.

"Come on," she said and smiled. "We're going to a party. You'll probably want to put on a sport jacket."

The party was already in full swing when they arrived. Hollywood's version of the lover, Bill Rennie, greeted them. Charles could see the quick glint of amusement in Rennie's eyes. The guests had come as he had said. There were perhaps fifteen people in the room, and their dress ranged from cocktail dresses to slacks and swimsuits. There were lovely women here, Charles saw. But none was lovelier than his wife. He felt an inexplicable sense of sadness.

The guests danced to the music of an ancient record player, set off in a corner. Bill danced with an assortment of happy, smiling women. And then he was dancing with Lisa, holding her tight. He kept whispering into her ear.

By three A.M., a good percentage of the guests were drunk. One in-

tense, dark-haired girl had a crying jag. She loved her boss; alas, he loved his wife.

Charles watched his wife dancing with Rennie. He saw her nod to something Rennie had said. She left Rennie quickly and walked over to him. Her blue eyes were enormous in her curiously pale face.

"I'm going back to our room for a while," she said softly. "I have to get something, and I want to put on fresh lipstick."

"Sure," he said. "Sure."

He made himself another drink, but he knew that all the whiskey here wasn't going to rid him of the bitter taste in his mouth.

Out in the center of the room, Bill Rennie suddenly pretended to be very drunk. He had been cold sober up to this point. He staggered a bit and made a drunken announcement. "Good-bye, cruel world," he said, then climbed up on the open window and stood poised, ready to dive.

Cries of panic burst from those who had never seen him jump into the pool from his room, and wild laughter from those who had.

Charles caught a glimpse of Bill's face, saw the mockery in it. It was all there before him now. Lisa was already gone; now Bill Rennie was going to join her. He was going to jump into the pool, and guests were going to scream and expect to see his crushed body down below.

Bill Rennie was going to meet his wife somewhere. Charles had gambled and he had lost. Never had he felt so old, tired.

Bill Rennie dove out over the balcony toward the pool, his grandstand trick. Some of the guests scrambled to the window. A woman screamed, but it was mock screaming. There were too many guests around her who were calm. It was a gag of some kind.

Suddenly, from below, near the pool, another woman began to scream. It split the night, and lights began to go on all over the place.

Men began to run from all directions. They pulled Bill Rennie out of the pool and stretched him out while they waited for an ambulance to arrive.

He was alive. Both arms were broken, and there was a severe cut over his head. His face would never be the same.

One of the men who had pulled him out of the pool said, "He's lucky. There's still about three feet of water in the deep part of the pool. That's all that saved his life."

The police arrived with sirens blasting the night. They investigated

and found that some joker had opened both drain cocks and had almost emptied the pool.

"It must have happened early in the evening," the hotel manager volunteered. "It would take several hours for the level to drop this much."

Charles Hannaford walked slowly back to his hotel room. Several hours for the pool's level to drop; that was about the time he had fallen asleep that night, right after dinner.

Charles entered his room very quietly. A small lamp was lit, and he could see his lovely wife, sleeping. Did he imagine it, or was there a tiny smile around her mouth?

Charles bent over her and kissed her, and felt a heady sense of triumph. You have to fight to keep what you have.



A Flower for Her Grave

by Hilda Cushing

It was just nine when Matt Lucas turned off the station lights and snapped the lock on the office door. He went to the small room in the rear where he used to keep supplies, but where he now lived, sleeping on the cot in the corner and cooking his meals on the two-burner hot plate. He changed from his coveralls into fresh chinos, plaid shirt and a windbreaker, and taking the flowers he had picked earlier in the evening, he let himself out the back door.

His car stood in the garage near the grease pit. Although it had been secondhand when he bought it in July, it was in excellent condition. The few nicks in the grillwork were not too obvious and it had been simple enough for him to pound out the dents in the fenders. After he had overhauled the motor, it purred as though it were fresh from the factory.

He had owned the station for a little over a year. After his retirement from the Stevenwell factory, compulsory at sixty-five, it had seemed a natural transition to own a service station which was complete with a garage for minor repairs and small parts. Both he and his wife were healthy and energetic, and had felt it was something they could handle together without hiring outside help. Although the hours were long and seven days a week, the road was only moderately traveled.

There had been plenty of time for Alethea to cultivate the garden in front of the station, to keep the little house next door, to cook appetizing meals, and to spell Matt at the gas pumps whenever he wanted a break. Coupled with the pension from the plant, it was a satisfactory living.

Alethea had been dead three months. So Matt had sold the little

house and moved into the rear room of the station. It was lonely with his wife gone but it seemed less so away from the house that cried out her absence.

He was careful with the flowers as he laid them on the seat beside him. They were fall mums that his wife had planted in the spring, gay and perky like herself.

There were no green thumbs on Matt but he kept the garden watered and free from weeds, and every Saturday he picked the prettiest of whatever was in blossom. The cemetery was fifteen miles away, in Mason City, but because he opened later on Sundays than on other days, he could still get in the full night's sleep he needed.

Fortunately, the station was in Stevenwell where he had lived most of his life. His old friends went out of their way to get their gas from him, and his new neighbors were kind. The men stopped often to chat with him and the women brought him treats for his meals.

Lately, Sergeant Paul Graham of the state police was in the habit of dropping by. Riding around most of the time, he used a lot of gas. Sometimes the cruiser needed emergency repairs. Sometimes he stopped just to talk. His frequent visits helped the time pass until it was Saturday night again.

As always, after dark, the entrance to the cemetery was chained so Matt parked his car by the side of the road and walked the hundred yards or so to Alethea's grave. Because of the thin clouds across the moon, its light shone soft and mellow on the small gray stone.

Matt threw the remains of last week's flowers in the trash bin nearby. There was no perpetual care here, and now, the middle of October, the water had been turned off until spring.

Along with the flowers and the water Matt had brought a cushion. The night air made the ground damp and lately he had noticed a stiffness whenever he bent his knees. He sat for a few moments looking around the cemetery. It seemed nicer tonight. The clouds blurred the neglected and unkempt plots. Some of the stones were large but many, like Alethea's, were of modest size. Most had dates of birth and death, while several of the larger ones had a phrase or a verse chipped into them.

His wife's stone had only "Alethea" on it. It was a pretty name, an endearment in itself, and he loved to say it. The last name was unimportant. There was only Matt. There were no children, and all their

close relatives were gone. It would never matter to anyone but himself where her grave was.

After the few moments of orientation, Matt began to talk. He was a simple, unimaginative man. He didn't believe in ghosts or spirits, or that the soul stayed with the body after death; but he was lonely and because her body was in the grave at his feet and because of the name on the stone, he felt near to her here.

During their thirty-eight years of marriage, they had never been separated except for that one time—the two weeks just before her death—the two weeks she had spent in her old home town of Wortham, seventy-six miles upstate, attending to the last days and burial of her only remaining relative, her sister, Miriam. Always before, Matt had accompanied her on her visits to Wortham; the station had made that impossible this last time.

Matt sat on his pillow, his short legs stretched out from his chunky body, his head bent a little, and, like every other Saturday night, he talked to his dead wife who had been short, too, and plump, and whose plain face had always appeared happy and loving.

"Sergeant Graham, the state trooper I told you about, stopped by again this morning, Alethea. Nothing new. He's on the late shift this month. Mavis—that's his wife—is going to have another baby. He says that makes three. In December sometime, they expect it."

He paused between thoughts.

"Mrs. Cunningham brought over some stew for supper. It was pretty spicy and I couldn't eat much of it, but she meant well so I threw away what was left before she sent one of her children over for the dish."

He shifted his legs a little.

"Got a letter from that lawyer who's handling Miriam's estate. The house brought a few thousand. She left everything to you—so now it comes to me. It will help. Won't have to paint the place myself. Need a few tools. Perhaps I'll get someone in to help over the weekends. Perhaps some boy from the high school."

That would please her. Alethea liked young people. This swing, mod, hip or whatever they called it generation never irritated her the way it did Matt. She used to say they only took a "little understanding", but Matt had no tolerance for the restless, brash types who roared up to the pumps in their souped-up heaps.

Somewhere in Stevenwell there must be some well brought up, am-

bitious boy who would like to make a little money in a part-time job; someone like the son they had wanted and never had. Perhaps he ought to talk it over with the sergeant before he contacted the high school, he told Alethea. Graham had lived in Stevenwell all his life. He should know who was headed for trouble and who wasn't. The town was small enough for that.

"Mrs. Hooper," he continued, "you must remember her, the big wheel in the garden club with the Pontiac I got the dent out of when she hit the hydrant in front of Penney's? Remember, she told you her husband never found out! Well, she says I should cover the garden after the first hard frost. Showed me which ones come up every year and promised to bring me some annuals in the spring."

His pause here was long and ended in an explosive, "It's not easy, Alethea—not easy at all—this living alone! I miss you so much!"

He swallowed hard. Only three months, and he was breaking his basic rule: to remain calm and cheerful during these visits.

"But I'm all right!" he promised hastily. "Don't you worry one bit! Keeping busy does the trick and I haven't grown sloppy either. I keep the sheets changed and the wash done. Still go every week to the all-night laundromat." He rubbed his forehead as though it ached but it was just a mannerism he had acquired lately. "Think I'll add on space for a shower stall before I get the station painted."

He could see Alethea smiling at this. Just last week he had regaled her with the unpredictability of the garden hose when it was attached to the faucet in the lavatory for his early morning shower.

He sat awhile without saying anything. There was a chill in the air. He'd better wear a pair of woolen pants next week instead of chinos.

"Oh, yes," he roused himself. "Don't think I'll close up all day this Thanksgiving, the way we did last year when Miriam came down. A few hours, perhaps. Mrs. Cunningham has invited me to dinner. A whole month away and she invited me already!" he chuckled. "She sure is nice but she's a terrible cook! Guess she can't do much harm to a turkey though." Then he added, "Want to bet?"

The chuckle threatened to turn into a sob. He choked it back. He sat there for a while longer, then leaned forward to loosen the stems of the flowers in the container. Alethea liked them floppy. She said they were more natural that way.

"Well, Alethea," he said, heaving himself to his feet, "guess that's

about all the news I got this time.”

He looked around slowly and wondered what it was going to be like in the winter. Would he be able to get through the snow after a big storm? He shook his head as though to clear it. He wasn't one to worry ahead of time. He would take each Saturday night as it came.

The car started easily, as usual. There was very little traffic along the road at this time of night. Sometimes he met or was passed by a car or two just over the Stevenwell line where the shortcut to the turnpike from Route 113 joined it. Now and then there would be a hitchhiker on his way to the entrance of the toll road interchange where it was fairly simple to pick up a ride.

Matt rounded the last sharp corner and was within two miles of the station when he saw him. Matt's car lights swinging around the curve had alerted him and in two quick strides he had swung himself to the center of the road, with right arm and thumb extended, and with that cocksure, confident grin they all seemed to have. He was probably around twenty, skinny, and with hair that fell like a mop over his forehead.

He was only a short distance from the turn and he held his ground until the car was almost upon him. Then just as he was about to step back and just as the grin began to fade, Matt gunned the motor and caught the thumber with such force that he was tossed into the air before he hit the macadam.

Matt backed up a few feet before he got out of his car. The boy was dead, probably from a broken neck. Matt dragged the body to the grass at the side of the road where the overhanging branches from the bushes would hide it, at least until daylight.

There was damage to the front of the car but not so much as last time. The grillwork, alone, had caught the impact, and the fresh dent from the slight weight of the boy was camouflaged by the many already there. The headlight was intact. He wouldn't have to take time to pick up each piece of glass, which was always hazardous. Another car might come along.

Something had flown out from under the boy's left arm as he was hit. Matt crossed the road to find it. It was a large thick book, shabby from use and scored by gravel; obviously a college textbook, something about electronics on the cover. He tossed it over the stone wall that edged that side of the road and stood a few moments biting his lip.

When he started back to the car, he was still somewhat bemused and the lights and the auto were around the bend and upon him before he could reach safety.

The driver stopped. Matt could just barely hear voices. The masculine one: "He may still be alive. Get back in the car and get help—get the police. I'll wait here!"

A woman's voice, frantic: "Don't you realize what that will mean? My husband will find out! We've got to get away from here! Right away! Hurry!"

There was a moment of silence, the sound of doors slamming, gears shifting, and the revving of the motor as the car skirted his body and the driver and his companion raced away. They hadn't been as lucky as Matt. Pieces of their broken headlight lay on the road, sparkling in the moonlight.

Sergeant Graham tiptoed up the stairs and into the bedroom. Mavis, his wife, in her seventh month, needed her sleep.

It was no good. She awoke as she always did. The light flashed on before he could close the door behind him. She pushed her pillow up against the headboard, her face flushed like a child's, her hair tousled.

"You're late, Paul," she said, not accusingly but with a hint of resignation.

"Another hit and run," he answered laconically as he got out of his uniform. "DOA."

"Another!" She was wide awake now. "And on a Saturday again. How many does that make?"

"Six since the middle of July and all on the same stretch of road between Mason City and Stevenwell."

From habit he undressed swiftly. He was in his pajamas now.

"Anyone from around here?" She was surprised when he nodded. The others had all been from distant places.

"Old Matt Lucas—owns the gas station over on Center Street."

"For heaven's sake!" She sat up straight. Her eyes were filled with concern. "The poor man! What was he doing walking along that road at night?"

"We haven't figured it out. We got this anonymous call from a pay phone around eleven. When we got there, his car was at the side of the road and he was near the middle. Must have been on his way

home from the cemetery in Mason City. He was in the habit of going there Saturday nights." He hung his uniform carefully in the closet. His voice was somewhat muffled but Mavis could still hear him. "There was broken glass nearby—has to be a headlight. Maybe this time we'll be able to trace it. About time for a break."

"That poor man," said Mavis again. "Didn't he lose his wife a while ago?" She thought for a moment. "Wasn't she murdered?"

Paul slipped into bed beside her. "On the way home from burying her sister in Wortham, three months back."

"I remember!" Mavis turned out the light and wriggled her bulky body down beside her husband. "You found her and the car three days later in the Lakeville woods near the reservoir—strangled and her purse missing!"

"Right." The sergeant was tired but he knew his wife. She had to have it straightened out in her mind or she'd never get to sleep or let him.

"But you never found who did it!"

"No, not yet anyway." It had been a long night but his voice was patient. "We're still working on it but we've never had any but the one clue. Someone who knew her saw her stop her car just outside of Wortham to pick up a hitchhiker."



Another Beautiful Day

by Harold Dutch

If I'd driven into town at midnight in the midst of a thunderstorm, with flashes of lightning and claps of thunder, it would be easier for me to believe what happened. If I'd driven in on a bleak October day, with the cold wind from the sea blowing dead leaves along deserted streets, I might have sensed what was to come. As it was, I drove into Bellport on a bright, hot summer afternoon, the harbor waters sparkling with sunshine and covered with pleasure craft, the homes—both year-round and summer—attractive and inviting, and the streets busy with happy, friendly-looking people.

It had been almost seven years since I'd driven up the Maine coast to Bellport. The trip was pleasant, and I took longer than I should have, for I was not exactly looking forward to visiting with Aunt Sarah. Since the tragedy that so affected all of us, her mind tends to wander and dwell on unpleasant things. This is what I was told by the woman I'd hired to care for her, for I hadn't seen Aunt Sarah since that night. Mrs. Record, the companion and housekeeper, wrote to me perhaps twice a month, a page at the most, but enough to keep me informed about my only living relative.

For years the trip to Bellport to visit Aunt Sarah and Uncle Hiram had been such a joy, at least for my brother and me, then to wander through the large house, up and down the stairways, hide in the huge closets, play in the great barn and its loft, pore over what seemed hundreds of old picture albums and the treasures that Uncle Hiram had brought back from all over the world.

Uncle Hiram was the object of our greatest affection. He seemed like a giant of a man to us in those days, tall, rugged, with a mass of untamed hair over a ruddy and creased face that featured a beak of a

nose, redder than the rest of his face, and dancing blue eyes. Uncle Hiram was always ready to play with us, always had some new, gory adventure tale that supposedly happened to him in some far-away place or on one of the many vessels he sailed. It wasn't until we were in high school that my brother and I realized what a low opinion our parents had of Uncle Hiram.

Aunt Sarah was mother's sister; Bellport was their hometown; and the house had been their father's, a well-known sea captain. Mother married an insurance man from Rhode Island. Aunt Sarah, late in life, married the gay seadog—a union, I found out later, that was frowned on by her family and most people in town. The opinion was that Uncle Hiram married Aunt Sarah for her money. She was locally prominent, quite well off, and had a fine home. He had spent his life roaming the world on all types of ships, had never been more than an able-bodied seaman with none too solid a reputation, but he had a charm and a personality few could resist. He gave up the sea when he married Aunt Sarah and settled down to look after his business interests, although few knew exactly what those interests were.

For as long as I can remember, each summer, during Dad's vacation, we came up—or “down” as Mother and Aunt Sarah used to say—for our yearly visit. My brother and I were identical twins: Donald and Ronald.

We drove through town, took the road that circled the bay, and soon could see the house on Height Of Land, looking down on the jagged rocks, the calm waters, and across to Bellport. The house, like so many in these Maine coastal towns, was white with green jalousie shutters, with a widow's walk perched atop the main part of the three-story house. It faced the bay and stood perhaps five hundred feet from the cliff. The drop was about thirty feet. At high tide, the water came to the base of the rock; at low tide, a rocky bottom was exposed, and here we often dug for clams. Steep and rickety wooden steps led down to the water level and a float, where Uncle Hiram kept a dinghy. There was a small lawn in front of the house, the rest being hay field, except for a small grove of pines clinging to the high point of the cliff. The road ran back of the house and its long, two-story ell. The big barn, painted red, stood on the right of the house and close to the road. A two-car garage, which Uncle Hiram had added in later years, was on the left of the house and connected to the “back room,” as we called

it—the end room in the ell.

Now I pulled into the driveway, and before I got out of the car Aunt Sarah was standing in the doorway. She must have been watching for me. She held out her arms, and I could see the tears running down her cheeks. She held me tightly for some time, her head on my shoulder. Aunt Sarah was short and heavy, with a round face that had lost none of its fullness and was still free from wrinkles. She must have been seventy-three, at least. As I remembered, she was ten years older than Mother. Her short white hair, a little too blue in shade, was in frizzy curls. She had probably had someone come in to “do” it in anticipation of my visit.

Aunt Sarah finally looked up into my face, then kissed me on the cheek. “Thank you for coming, Ronald,” she said. “It’s been so long.”

I patted her on the shoulder. “And it’s nice to see you, Aunt Sarah. But I’m Donald.”

A wild, mad look came into her eyes. It frightened me, and I tried to pull away, but she held me tight, staring wide-eyed at me. Then suddenly, the eyes became blank, and she released me.

“Yes. Yes, of course,” she said. “Come in and meet Mrs. Record.”

She took my hand and led me through the back room, with its laundry equipment, stacks of flowerpots, old sweaters and aprons hung on wall hooks, with rubbers and overshoes beneath, assorted hand tools scattered over an old scarred chest of drawers, and numerous other items filling every corner. The room hadn’t changed for as long as I could remember, except for the modern laundry equipment. We went through the pantry, its shelves well stocked, and through the large kitchen with its table in the center of the room, through the dining room with its large and ornate furniture, including sideboard and china closet, and into the parlor at the front of the house.

Aunt Sarah led me to Mrs. Record who was seated in a chair by the window, knitting. “Alma, this is my nephew, Donald. My sister’s boy. Donald, this is Mrs. Record, who was nice enough to come in and stay with me.”

We said hello and Mrs. Record sadly shook her head.

“I know Mrs. Record,” I said to Aunt Sarah. “I got her to come stay here with you, remember?”

She just patted my hand and said, “Come and sit on the couch with me and tell me all about yourself. What have you been doing?”

This room, too, looked the same as it always had—crowded. Although a large, high-posted room, it pressed in on you with the hundreds of items it contained: chairs, tables, nicknack shelves, pictures, the heavy upholstered furniture with its crocheted antimacassars, the big fireplace, the great windows surrounded with heavy draperies. Every bit of floor and wall space seemed occupied, and the tables, the shelves, and the fireplace mantel were covered with framed snapshots, figurines, plates.

"I'm still with the bank," I said. "You know that. I write you, but I never hear from you."

She sighed. "Oh, it's so hard for me to settle down and write. I've asked Alma to write you. Doesn't she?"

Mrs. Record said, "Now, Mrs. Spinney, I read you every letter I write to him. And I always ask you if there is anything special you want me to say, don't I?"

I changed the subject. "You're looking very well, Aunt Sarah. Do you get out much?"

"I get out and tend my flowers when the weather's warm. We go over town shopping most every week. But I haven't been out the past few days. Those men have been around here, and I . . ." Her voice faded.

I looked at Mrs. Record. "FBI," she said. "They're still looking for it."

"You never mentioned it in your letters."

"They just showed up a few days ago. They want to find it before the seven years are up, don't they?"

Aunt Sarah patted my hand again and smiled at me as if she hadn't heard us. "You look about the same, Ron—Donald. Why didn't Nellie and Philip come with you?"

Mrs. Record and I exchanged glances again. "Mother and Dad died, remember?"

She looked at me a moment with that blank stare, then sighed. "Oh, yes. Yes, the same time Hiram went. I saw him the other night."

Mrs. Record dropped her knitting in her lap. "Now, Mrs. Spinney, you know you didn't see anyone!"

"But I did, dear. As plain as I see you."

Mrs. Record said to me, "She thought she heard something night before last and went wandering out in the hall. I heard her calling and

got her back in bed. There was no one around, and I didn't hear a thing except her."

"I know I saw Hiram. He was going up the stairs to the third floor. That's why I called to him, but he just disappeared."

"Aunt Sarah," I said. I felt she must face the truth. "Aunt Sarah, listen to me carefully. Uncle Hiram, my father, and Ronald were all killed, all the same night, almost seven years ago now. And the shock killed Mother the next day—her heart. You, too, were in the hospital—for a month or so. You remember that, don't you?"

She was looking out of the window, down toward the bay. "I don't see the men today. Yesterday, they were searching all over the field and cliff."

Mrs. Record rolled her eyes and got up from the chair. "Well, I'll get supper. We eat around here at five o'clock," she said to me, "if you don't mind. Supper at five, bed at nine."

"I don't mind a bit. I didn't have much lunch, so I'm hungry."

"Good. We're having lobster salad. Your Aunt Sarah remembered you liked that."

"Wonderful!" I turned to Aunt Sarah. "Thank you, very much."

Aunt Sarah was staring into space, smiling to herself. She murmured something.

The supper was truly delicious, the lobster fresh from the sea water at the lobster pound down the road, and Mrs. Record's sourmilk biscuits, the flakiest and lightest I'd ever eaten, so hot from the oven the butter immediately became rivulets. Aunt Sarah had wanted to eat in the dining room, in my honor, but I insisted we sit at the kitchen table. This is where we'd always eaten, except when special guests came. It was a bright, cheerful room, and I thoroughly enjoyed the meal.

We chatted pleasantly on a number of things unrelated to the family, and Aunt Sarah was rational throughout the meal; in fact, through the evening. She took me outside and showed me her flower beds, told me all her troubles with weeds and the bugs, what insecticides she used, how often she watered, and just what fertilizer was best. It was warm, so we sat outside until dark. The harbor was a busy place on a summer evening, with many pleasure craft plying the waters and a number out fishing. There were rowboats, outboards of all sizes, lobster boats, sailboats, and cabin cruisers. I felt very relaxed, and the fear of my visit disappeared.

Shortly after we came inside, Aunt Sarah and Mrs. Record went to bed. I sat up for a while looking over the old picture albums; the ones that covered the years of our visits. Here were Aunt Sarah and Uncle Hiram holding us as babies; Aunt Sarah holding both of us; Uncle Hiram holding both. Here we were on top of a hay wagon, with Dad and Uncle Hiram standing beside the horse. There was a snap of us sitting on the hood of the new Essex Dad had bought just before vacation. Two out-of-focus shots were labeled: "Donald taken by Ronald" and "Ronald taken by Donald." Here we were at a clambake. Written on it was: "Ronald with the Lobster. Donald with the Hamburger." There was one of me standing on the stairway platform at the top of the cliff, taken by my brother. This picture had been a great joke with us, because there I was standing on our secret hiding place, and no one could see it. We had dug up a large sod by the side of the platform and, over a period of days, handful by handful, scooped out the earth beneath the planks and scattered it over the cliff. With the sod of tall grass in place, no one could tell there was an empty space under the platform. We had dug a large hole, and here we hid many of our treasures, and never told anyone. I remembered how many times we showed that picture, giggling the while because no one suspected our secret.

I flipped the pages of the album, and the years passed. On each few pages we grew a little older. Here we were with two girls, standing at the front of the house. It was the summer after our first year at college. They were Bellport girls we'd invited to a dance, daughters of some friends of Aunt Sarah's. She wanted a picture of us "all dressed up," so we brought the girls to the house and posed self-consciously on the granite steps. The girls were wearing white dresses with flared skirts. The length looked ridiculous now. And we were in white jackets, with gray flannels. I smiled. We looked so young, so innocent, but that night our education was to begin.

We went to a dance pavilion at a lake. It had a wide veranda all around, with the sides of the building open to the night. A huge lighted globe of multi-colored glass, hung from the center of the ceiling, went 'round and 'round, splattering the floor with dots of red, blue, green, yellow. We danced until one o'clock to "Route 66," "Ole Buttermilk Sky," "Civilization (Bongo, Bongo, Bongo)," "Five Minutes More," and other late hits I can't remember.

We got back to the house, after taking the girls home, about two A.M. We walked around the house to go in the front door, as it was closer to our bedroom, when we saw the figure down by the cliff. It was a dark night, under a pale, new moon, but at regular intervals a shadow at the top of the stairs was outlined against the bay, then it would disappear down the steps or into the blackness of the field. We watched for a while, saying nothing. A man seemed to be carrying something heavy up the steps and going back empty-handed.

I felt a nudge in my ribs. I nodded and slowly we started down through the field. It was early July, and the hay had not been cut. The rustle of the grass seemed thunder to our ears, and we stopped every few steps to make sure we were not heard. It seemed to take us forever, and I wished I hadn't come. Across the bay an occasional light twinkled, but almost everyone in Bellport was in bed. Once, a moving glâre indicated a car on the road. We could hear its engine as it started up the hill toward the house. The figure, at that moment at the cliff's edge, stopped and turned. We ducked down in the grass. The sound of the car grew louder, the lights brighter, then they passed the house and faded in the distance. We both sighed and cautiously stood up. The figure was gone, and we picked our way on down. We could now hear the lapping of the water on the rocks. It would be almost high tide. We ducked again as the shadow came up to the top, carrying a box or a chest. I had visions of pirate's treasure and hidden gold. A few feet from the platform, he put the box down. There were a number of them lined up. We moved to the left to get into the pine grove, then on the soft pine needles ran to the edge and looked down. A lobster boat was tied up to the float. I was wondering where the man was when I felt the big hand on my shoulder. I jumped, and must confess I yelled. The hand slapped over my mouth, and a deep voice said, "Be quiet, laddie. You want to wake the dead?"

It was Uncle Hiram!

He took his hand off my mouth. "If you laddies want to go sneaking about in the dark of night, take off your fancy white jackets. You stand out like a sore thumb. Now, how about bed? I'll walk halfway up with you." He took each of us by the arm in a strong grip and led us through the grove, carefully avoiding, I noticed, getting too close to those boxes, or whatever they were.

Trying to be nonchalant, I asked him, "What are you doing out so

ANOTHER BEAUTIFUL DAY

late, Uncle Hiram?"

"Tending to a little business. You boys didn't know, but I do a little importing on the side. The shipment happened to come in a little late."

Ronald suddenly broke from Uncle Hiram's grasp, then calmly walked over to the mysterious merchandise. "Pretty good shipment, Uncle Hiram," he said. "Canada's finest. How much do you get a case? Or do you peddle it by the quart?"

"Well now," Uncle Hiram answered, "does being a college freshman make you an expert on whiskey?"

"I know a smuggling operation when I see it."

"And I suppose you'll go crying to the police!"

"No, Uncle Hiram. Fact is, I can help you get rid of the stuff."

I closed the album. Ronald had, in fact, gone in business with Uncle Hiram; selling it on campus, and to the owner of the roadhouse just outside the college town, who became one of his big customers. Nothing was said, of course, to our parents or to Aunt Sarah, but I learned later they all knew that Uncle Hiram was "importing" various items—whiskey was only one of his lines—but they never knew Ronald was part of the operation until it all came to a head seven years ago.

I looked at my watch; it was five past eleven. I decided it was bedtime and went up the stairway from the front hall to my room. There was no sound from Aunt Sarah's or Mrs. Record's room. Aunt Sarah slept over the front parlor; Mrs. Record, across the hall, over the sitting room. My room was next to Mrs. Record's, and the stairs to the third floor started up opposite my door. I couldn't seem to get to sleep, I tried to make my mind blank, but old scenes seethed through it. I lay for over an hour tossing and turning, then the sound slowly impressed itself on me. I sat up in bed. It was a creaking sound—steady, rhythmic, as if someone were creeping up the stairs. I got out of bed and tiptoed to the door. I hesitated a moment, then slowly turned the knob and opened it. The sound was now on the flight to the third floor. I stepped into the hall and looked up. I'd like not to admit what I saw. I'd like to think it was as unsubstantial as the figures my mind had conjured up a few minutes before, for someone was disappearing into the upstairs hall, and the silhouette was unmistakable—the size, the profile, the nose, the hair—Uncle Hiram!

My feet froze on the spot. Then suddenly a voice hissed in my ear.

I whirled.

"See! I was right. It was him!" Aunt Sarah was at my elbow.

I led her back to her bedroom, then went to my own. In spite of the warm summer night, I was shivering. I put on an extra-blanket but continued to shiver, sleepless, until dawn.

When I heard Mrs. Record get up, I dressed and went down to breakfast. She looked at me rather sharply, I thought. "Didn't you sleep well, Mr. Wood?" she asked.

I tried to smile. "Overtired from the drive, I guess. I had some trouble getting to sleep."

"Your aunt won't be down for another hour or so, if you'd care to wait."

"No. I'm afraid I'm the type who has to eat on rising."

"Me too. We never breakfast together."

I attempted to sound casual. "What about this appearance of Uncle Hiram? Has Aunt Sarah seen him more than once?"

She gave me another penetrating look. "Why? Do you think she really saw him?"

"Of course not. I just wondered how long she'd had this delusion."

"It's the only time she's mentioned it. But, you know, the poor dear at times lives in a world of her own. She thought she saw him last night, didn't she? I heard you taking her back to her room."

"Er—yes. Yes, she did."

"You didn't see anything, did you?" She stared at me.

I took a big swallow of coffee. "No. Why? Did you expect me to?"

She laughed. "Not really. But I've never ruled out the possibility of ghosts. Just wanted to make sure. Not that I'm frightened, you understand. I figure if his ghost is wandering about, it's after the money, not me."

I'm afraid I started at the knock on the door.

"I guess you didn't get much sleep last night," was Mrs. Record's remark as she went to answer it. She returned with an athletic-looking young man. "Agent Herman wanted to see you," she said. "I didn't think you'd mind."

He held out his hand. "Wally Herman, Federal Bureau of Investigation." He handed me his credentials.

I asked him to sit down, and before I could offer coffee, Mrs. Record had placed a full cup in front of him. He looked up and smiled.

"Thank you. Mr. Wood," he said to me, "I'd like to go over the case with you, if I could. If we don't find something in a couple of days, we're out of it."

"What do you expect to find?" I asked.

"The money, for one thing," he said. "It's got to be around here. It wouldn't walk away by itself."

"Perhaps it wasn't brought here. Perhaps it was chucked overboard."

"Unlikely. From all evidence, he carried this through like all his other operations. The government was about to move in on him, anyway, you know. We'd discovered the smuggling ring—the liquor, the jewelry, the furs—quite an operation. The stuff left Canada by boat, was transferred once at sea—very careful, they were—then transferred to the lobster boat and brought in here. When the payroll truck got hit, this was our first stop."

"Why did you suspect him right off?"

"Well, as you know, the truck was robbed on that lonely coastal road of eight hundred thousand dollars. The guard untied himself, took his blindfold off, and saw two people rowing out and getting on the boat. And, of course, he later identified your brother—his body. It was a hunch at the time, but we just decided to check out Hiram Spinney. They must have had the money on board when they tied up down here because they didn't know then that we were after them. Where did it go?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you."

"It would help if you'd go over the details of that night," he said.

"After all these years, I don't know. It's something I've tried to forget, anyway." I didn't want to go through all that again.

"I wasn't on the case then, you know, but I've read and reread the report. You were very helpful then. I'd appreciate it if you'd help now. I'm here for one last try. Someplace, somewhere, we've overlooked something. I think the answer's here, and I'd like your permission to search."

"Well, I don't know. This is my aunt's house. I'd have to check with her."

"You're her legal guardian, Mr. Wood. I'm sure you want to cooperate."

"Well, if you have to," I said. "I don't want to upset my aunt too much." I thought if he'd get it over with, perhaps he'd leave us alone.

He finished his coffee. "Why don't we walk down to the shore?" he asked.

I knew then that I shouldn't have come back. I decided I'd leave tomorrow, leave all this behind—for good.

We started down through the field. "Beautiful day, isn't it?" he said. And it was—clear blue sky with a few puffs of high clouds, warm, the harbor as calm as a lake—so different from the last time.

Herman said, "It was storming that night, I understand."

I shivered. I could feel the rain beating on me. "It was a terrible thunderstorm."

"We figure," he said, "they were going to transfer the money to their other boat and get it to Canada, a sort of reverse of the smuggling line, but the storm came up, and they had to come in. It must have been a job to bring that boat through the storm. I understand it was a bad one."

"Awful!" I said. "I never heard the wind howl so, but it didn't cover up Uncle Hiram's shriek as he plunged over the cliff." I shook my head, trying to lose the sound of the scream, the wind, the thunder, the pelting rain. I still heard it.

"You were visiting here with your parents?"

"Yes. It was the second year that Ronald hadn't come. Dad wanted us to take our vacations at the same time, but Ronald said he was too busy. At the height of the storm, Uncle Hiram came pounding and roaring at the door, calling for help with the boat. Dad and I grabbed raincoats and followed him down. Then the cars with flashing lights appeared, the men shouting at us and firing shots in the air and Uncle Hiram swearing, and we kept running, for then they were shooting at us. The wind rose, there was an ungodly clap of thunder, and the lightning struck the tallest pine. It fell with a crash, hitting Dad. He never got up. Then Uncle Hiram started shooting at the police. I saw my brother run into the grove, and I chased him. I guess he didn't know me. He started fighting me, savagely. I had to protect myself. Bloody, soaked to the skin, we pounded each other and I knocked him down. His head hit the rock, and I didn't have a twin any more. I started from the trees and saw Uncle Hiram fighting with someone at the edge of the cliff, then I heard that scream as he plunged over the side. The police rushed down the stairs; there was no one on the boat. They secured it as best they could, then found me, collapsed on the

platform, when they came back up."

Herman and I were now at the top of the stairs. The goose pimples stood out on my arms. He said, "That's just as you had it in the report. Are you sure you've remembered everything?"

"I think I've remembered too much."

"What was the tide then?"

"High. With the storm, very high."

He looked down over the side. "I guess that's why your uncle didn't hit the rocks. The body was never found."

"No one could have lived in the water that night. No one!"

"No, probably not. But he was a pretty rugged guy, I understand."

"He's dead! He couldn't possibly have survived!"

"And this is the grove over here where you fought with your brother? He didn't have anything with him? The money would have been in a steel case."

I shook my head. I felt as exhausted as I had then. They'd taken me to a hospital, I was there for a week. Both Mother and Aunt Sarah collapsed on hearing the news. Mother never regained consciousness.

Herman was saying, "If they didn't bring the money up here, and it wasn't on the boat—rather strange, don't you think?"

I shrugged. "They could have tossed it overboard. It could have fallen over."

"The area was dragged, but turned up nothing."

"The seas and a storm can hide many things."

He said, "We've looked things over pretty well the past couple of days. Now I'd like to look in the barn and garage. Perhaps Hiram stashed it somewhere before he knocked at the door."

"Don't you think after all these years . . ." I started to say.

"I don't think your aunt has disturbed much of anything. I'd just like to look, if it's all right with you."

We went back to the house. He gave the garage a casual look, then went to the barn. I didn't go with him. I went into the house.

Mrs. Record told me that Aunt Sarah had seen us down by the water and had refused to get up. She was eating breakfast in bed. I said I would get her tray, and went up to her bedroom.

"What does that man want?" she asked me.

"He's looking for the money, Aunt Sarah."

"Why don't you tell him where it is, Ronald?"

"Aunt Sarah, look at me." She looked through and beyond me. "I'm Don. Donald. Do you understand?"

Her eyes focused on me, and she smiled. "You can take my tray now. I think I'll get up. Tell that young man I want to talk to him."

"I don't think that's wise. Besides, I thought you were afraid of him."

"I just want to see him. Now, bring him into the parlor, and I'll be right down."

I didn't want to excite her, so I did as I was told. I found Herman in the hayloft of the barn which, for years, had been used for storage.

"Have you been looking around up here?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I haven't been in the barn since I got here."

"Someone's been up here pushing things around."

I looked away. "What makes you think that?"

"Dust. Trunks and chests have been moved from where they stood for a long time. Who do you suppose would do that?"

"I have no idea," I said. "Aunt Sarah would like to see you. She's waiting for you in the parlor. Please remember she gets quite confused at times."

He brushed his hands and then his clothes. "Well, let's go see her."

As soon as I brought him into the room, Aunt Sarah asked me to leave. They talked for about twenty minutes, as I paced the kitchen, while Mrs. Record prepared lunch.

Herman came out smiling. "I'll be leaving now. Thanks for your cooperation, Mr. Wood. If you think of anything you want to tell me, I'm at the Seaview Motel."

I saw him to the door. "What did she say to you?"

"She just has a theory."

"She's been mixed up ever since I arrived."

"She's a nice old lady," he said, "but you're right; she is somewhat confused. 'Bye."

I marched into the front room. "What did you tell him, Aunt Sarah?"

"Nothing, dear." She patted my cheek. "After lunch, you can take Mrs. Record and me over town shopping. We won't have to hire a taxi."

"Aunt Sarah, did you tell him that you thought you saw Uncle Hiram?"

She looked me right in the eye. "Of course not. Do you want him to think I'm crazy?"

After eating, we poked around Bellport most of the afternoon. It was very boring for me, and I'm afraid I got impatient. That night, at supper, I told Aunt Sarah that I would be leaving in the morning.

She turned her eyes from me. "And I suppose you won't be coming back?"

I tried to sound positive. "Don't be silly, Aunt Sarah. Of course I will." But I knew she didn't believe me.

Both she and Mrs. Record went to bed early; we couldn't seem to find much to talk about. I went to my room, too, and paced the floor for a couple of hours. I knew what I had to do.

When I felt sure they were both asleep, I packed my things and tiptoed out into the hall. I left my bag by my door and slipped out of my loafers. I knew I had little time, but I wasn't afraid now. Carefully, cautiously, I mounted the stairs to the third floor. There were two doors; I chose the one over Aunt Sarah's room. I could hear snoring behind it. Slowly, I turned the knob and inched the door open. The moonlight poured through the window, over the mattress on the floor and the figure on it. He had aged quite a bit, but he was very much alive—Uncle Hiram. How he ever survived the sea and the storm, and where he'd been these seven years, I don't know. He never got in touch with me. But here he was, obviously back hunting for the money, and resting now, I presumed, for another late night search, perhaps through the barn again. If he'd been awake, I don't know what I'd have done. I closed the door and went back downstairs, put on my shoes, took my bag, and went out the front door. I put the suitcase down by the corner of the house and struck off through the field.

The moon was too bright. I had hoped for a cloudy night, but I didn't have time to be cautious. Besides, no one knew. I was panting when I got to the cliff. The sod, of course, had grown solidly back into the earth, but with frantic digging, I managed to tear it away. Dirt had filled in under the platform, but I found the case and dragged it out. No time to look in it now; I stood up, ready to go.

The hand fell on my shoulder and I froze. I couldn't bear to turn and face him.

"Ah, laddie, so you did hide it. And this time, it's you who'll go over the cliff!"

The voice of Agent Herman interrupted, thank God. "Mr. Wood, Mr. Spinney, you are under arrest, charged with robbery and, Mr. Wood, you are charged with the murder of your brother, Donald. You are *Ronald* Wood, aren't you?"

So it ended. They hurried Uncle Hiram off, so we couldn't talk.

Herman said, "I figure you had the case of money from the boat when you went into the grove."

I nodded.

"And you and your brother fought, and after you killed him, you decided to change places with him. Then you hid the money here."

"I just changed the contents of our pockets," I said. I'd been informed of my rights, but there was no sense in keeping still. It was all over. I knew it. "Even the people at the bank didn't suspect. When I seemed a bit confused, they were very considerate, knowing what I'd been through. How did you know? You'd never seen us."

"Your aunt gave me the idea this afternoon. We weren't sure. Just thought we'd watch you. Your Uncle Hiram was an added attraction."

"But Aunt Sarah's crazy. You know that!"

"I wouldn't be too sure. She was certain Donald didn't like seafood and Ronald did. Even showed me that picture of Donald eating a hamburger at a clambake! And you really enjoyed that lobster last night, didn't you?"

It was another beautiful day as the police drove me out of Bellport and down the coast. If I'd only sensed what was to come, seven years of waiting—for nothing. I should have waited longer. Seven years between trips to Bellport, and both ended in disaster. Now I'd never get back. I looked across the bay to Height Of Land and the house. I thought I saw Aunt Sarah watering her flowers.



Incident at Mardi's

by Herbert Brean

There weren't very many members in The Players Club bar when Davenport came in that afternoon; he made his entrance to a small audience. Still, it was a fairly dramatic entrance.

He walked across the room to the bar, looking at no one, and ordered a drink from Eddie. But a backgammon game stopped for a full half minute, and at the Players a backgammon game is hard to halt, even momentarily. One of the pool players looked up, saw who had come in, looked down again, missed his shot, and his opponent missed his shot. Neither swore. This is actually unheard of.

Eddie served Davenport his drink and the room returned to normal.

I cannot say what the others thought, but personally I admired Davenport enormously for what he was doing. It took even more courage than anyone knew, anyone, that is, except Davenport—and myself, if I may be permitted.

I put down the afternoon paper I had been reading and strolled toward the bar. Folding the paper away seemed the tactful thing. Its big headline screamed what was in everyone's mind. The previous evening Davenport had killed, or had a hand in killing, a rather prominent woman.

Patty Bell was her name, the wife of the producer of the Broadway dramatic hit in which Davenport was starred. A young and flamboyantly handsome actor, Melvin Davenport had arrived, theatrically speaking, when Bell selected him for the lead in *Next to God*. Some said Davenport got the role because Mrs. Bell liked him. I don't know. I do know that Dav was ideal for the part because, as it happens, I wrote the play. I also know he is happily married, or so it had always seemed, to a lovely girl who had stuck with him during the lean years

of role-hunting and summer stock, and with whom he had two children and a home in Fairfield County. I also knew that for the past six months Dav and Patty had been seen together very, very often. I knew that because every columnist in town had reported it at least twice.

I walked up to the bar where Dav was standing alone, and when Eddie looked up I pointed to Dav's glass and said, "One of those."

Eddie gave me a look. "A double Scotch?" He knows I'm a dry sherry man.

Davenport didn't look at all.

"A double Scotch, you Irish mug, and no backtalk."

Eddie grinned. He insults members all the time, and he gets lonesome if we don't insult him occasionally.

Anyway, Davenport had been sitting, after his matinee yesterday, in Mardi's with Patty Bell, a lady who was once very beautiful and was still an attractive forty-eight. And Howard Bell had walked in.

The morning papers could and did report every detail of what followed because the restaurant was full of Broadway people who knew all three of them. The police had no trouble getting eyewitness accounts.

Dav and Patty had just been served espressos when Bell walked up to their table. He leaned over it and said something to his wife. The other tables could not hear it, and Dav got up and said something equally *sotto voce*. Then Bell pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and threw it on the table, and Dav said something and Bell answered, obviously enraged, and lunged for Dav. Dav pulled a gun.

What followed was as curious as it was sudden. It seems the paper Bell threw down on the table was a note written by his wife. It read: "Mardi's today the instant after last curtain. The *instant*, dear."

With it was another note, typewritten and addressed to Bell.

Davenport had rushed to what was their usual meeting place without even changing from the tweed jacket and flannel slacks which were his costume during the third act. He paused only long enough to take a couple of curtain calls, hurried to the dressing room and towed the make-up off his face, then walked to the restaurant which is around the corner.

Consequently, he carried with him in his jacket pocket the blank cartridge pistol which he uses in the last act of *Next to God* and fires once through an open window at a lurking prowler, as you may recall.

"When Howard came up to the table and started cursing me," the

Daily News quoted Dav afterward, "my only thought was to shut him up. His wife and I are merely good friends, but someone had sent him one of those dirty poison-pen letters accusing Mrs. Bell and myself of all sorts of things, and enclosing this note which told him when and where we were meeting today. He was hysterical—out of his mind."

In any case, hot and unforgivable words passed between them. Bell, obviously berserk, leaped at Davenport while dozens watched, and Davenport thought of the pistol in his pocket, actually harmless, of course, with its blank cartridges. He pulled it out.

Witnesses agreed Davenport held Bell at bay momentarily with the nickel-plated .32 as waiters began moving forward. Then each man said something to the other, the gun in Davenport's hand drooped down momentarily, and Bell leaped for it. They struggled, each with a hand on the gun. Black coffee spilled over Patty. She screamed. She leaped up, grabbed wildly at both men, and the gun went off—twice. The waiter closed in.

Patty sank forward onto the table, and then slipped to the floor. For a second the restaurant was unbelievably silent. No one could accept what they had just seen. Patty was dying.

For the gun had not been loaded with blanks, but with real bullets. One had hit her in the mouth, ranging up into the brain, and the other struck in her left breast not far from the heart. She was dead even before two internes arrived on the run from nearby Polyclinic . . .

Davenport drained his drink and said, "Another," to Eddie and Eddie poured it fast. Davenport looked at me for the first time.

I said, "Hi."

Only his drink, raised in friendly acknowledgment, answered me. His eyes were dark and weary.

I finished my drink and pushed the glass to Eddie for another. I told Davenport, "Nobody blames you. It was one of those things. Everyone knows how you must feel. But try to realize tragic accidents like this happen, with no one really to blame."

It was true that nobody blamed him. He and Bell had both been questioned well into the night by the police, but the morning newspapers had reported the unanimous verdict of the medical examiner, the detectives of the Sixteenth Squad and the Homicide Bureau. It was "accidental death," the result of a fantastic coincidence. Both Davenport and Bell had been released.

Investigation had, in fact, revealed an astonishing irony. The gun Dav used in the play was always loaded for each performance by the property man. The property man had recently ordered a new supply of blank cartridges, six 50-load packages, and he had unaccountably been delivered one carton containing live ammunition; the police had found it in the prop room. So when Davenport fired the pistol in the final scene that afternoon, he had shot a real bullet. Examination of the theater's brick back wall proved it.

No one had immediately noticed the small hole in the backdrop, any more than the prop man—as he later said voluminously—had noticed the little snub-nosed slugs in the “blank” cartridges, he had used to load the gun. Patty Bell had thus been killed by an impossible accident, coupled with an unexpected confrontation.

Eddie had walked away out of ear shot. I moved closer to Dav and spoke quietly. “What made you feel you had to kill her, Dav?”

Only the tightening of nostrils in a perfectly-chiseled nose told me I was right. That was no surprise; I had already deduced the truth. As you have, I'm sure.

Dav said, “Are you plastered? Or just some kind of nut?”

“Neither. And you're safe. Shall I tell you why you're safe?”

He was studying the back bar.

“There is a weak spot in your story, but the police will never spot it because they don't know Patty like you do. The weak spot is in the letter that Patty sent. Howard Bell got it yesterday in the mail. That was the day of the killing, so it obviously was mailed the day before. But it made the date of your meeting ‘today,’ which is the day that Bell got it. And I will bet that the nasty accompanying letter also emphasized that you two would be meeting at Mardi's at that time.

“Which all means that Patty's note in her own handwriting had to be written some time before. And saved. And used at the right time. By whom? It could only have been someone she was much interested in and had been recently meeting. There is only one such person.”

“You're crazy.”

“No, just moderately reasonable, though what I am suggesting is, on the face of it, completely unreasonable. Why should you of all people send her husband a note like that, plus a scurrilous letter that could result only in a public brawl?”

“Why would you possibly do such a thing? Even to conceive of it is

fantastic. But look at the result. What was the result? Patty was killed.

"Could you have wanted that? Of course not. You were greatly attracted to her. You had often been seen with her. That is your real disguise, and it was why you dared do what you did in front of a restaurant full of witnesses. You murdered her."

He was protesting no more. He was listening, his head down.

"Make that assumption, crazy as it seems," I said, "and everything else fits. Who had a chance backstage to substitute a carton of live ammunition for one of the cartons of blanks that the property man had, so that it would be found later? You did. Who would have a chance to reload the gun with ammo? The prop man had made no mistake about the blanks, although everyone thought he did. You had the chance. Who could make sure, in firing that shot on stage with a loaded gun, that he would not hit anyone? Only the man firing the gun."

"How do you—why do you think you know so much?"

"Because I know who had a motive for killing her. I know it and you know it, but the police can never learn it. She was an insatiable woman who used up men like cigarettes, and was astonishingly demanding. Which gets back to my original question. What was it that she demanded of you and that you wouldn't give? Marriage?"

The nod was almost imperceptible.

"So I figured. You love your career, and to further it you would go along with the boss's wife to a point. But you also loved your own wife and family. You wouldn't let Patty make you throw away everything that means the most in your life. So being an actor, you figured out a foolproof way of killing her. Stage a public scene. Lure her husband into a quarrel, by note and then by insult across the table. Draw a gun that you presumably could not possibly know was loaded. Let him start a scuffle for it and, because you are younger and stronger, when the gun was pointed right, pull the trigger a couple of times. Who would ever think it was anything but accidental?"

"What *really* tipped you off?"

"I've told you. I knew Patty once—twenty years ago. I was a young and promising playwright then, and I was considered quite handsome, if I may say so. I was also happily married. So I know what Patty can be like. My marriage ended in divorce, you see. She's lucky to have lived as long as she did. No one's turning you in, Dav. Another drink?"

The Greatest Robbery on Earth

by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

The Borgville Bank was held up back in 1937, which was two years before I was born. That might lead you to believe that I don't remember anything about it, and you'd be wrong. Everyone in Borgville remembers the bank robbery. People have been talking about it ever since it happened, and I could describe it just as well as the old timers who actually saw it take place.

Up until yesterday, that bank robbery was the most important thing that ever happened in our town, about the greatest thing on earth. Every state trooper in this corner of the state converged on Borgville. Sheriff Pilkins swore in seventeen deputies, which was only one less than he had yesterday. The mayor wired the governor to call out the national guard. Not only was it an exciting afternoon, but the bank failed a week later because of the robbery, and just about everyone lost some money.

The F.B.I. and the state police were in and out of Borgville for weeks afterwards, and my grandfather was one of the star witnesses. The people in the bank didn't see the robber very well, because he kept his hat down and his coat pulled up over his face. But Grandfather saw him driving away, and he got a good look at him. The F.B.I. took Grandfather away to look at pictures, to see if he could identify the robber. He said he couldn't, and the robber never got caught, and the bank never got its ten thousand dollars back.

It was a nice thing for Grandfather, though. Borgville started to respect him. Grandfather has always been an independent sort of person, and because Borgville is a solid Republican town, Grandfather naturally became a Democrat. People were a little suspicious of him, until he saw the bank robber and got to be such an important person.

To understand what happened in Borgville yesterday, you have to know just how the town felt about that bank robbery. It happened twenty years ago, but folks have been talking about it ever since, and for the last twenty years Grandfather has been saying maybe twice a week that he'd recognize the man who held up the bank if he ever saw him again. Grandfather never forgets a face.

Grandfather left the house at one o'clock yesterday afternoon and walked up to Borgville's business section, which he always does when it's a nice day. He stopped in at Snubbs' Hardware Store and picked up old man Snubbs' morning paper, then went across the street to the bench in front of Jake Palmer's Barber Shop and sat down in the sun to read.

Grandfather is past eighty now, but on him it's hardly noticeable. He was a blacksmith when he was a young fellow, and he's still built like one. He lost all his hair before he was fifty, so of course he never got gray-headed. Except for his liking to sit in the sun for awhile of an afternoon, he's about as spry as I am—spryer, my mother says. His eyes are as sharp as they ever were, and he still never forgets a face.

Nat Barlow was sitting there with Grandfather, in front of the barber shop, and when a stranger drove up and parked, Nat nudged Grandfather, and said, "Who's that?"

Grandfather looked over the top of his paper and said, "That's the bank robber," and went on reading.

Nat grabbed Grandfather's arm and shouted, "Are you sure?" And Grandfather said, "Sure I'm sure. I never forget a face."

Nat jumped up and ran into the barber shop. There were five or six men in there, talking with Jake, and Nat pointed at the stranger and said, "That's the bank robber!"

Those men tore out of the back door of the shop, and Jake pulled down the curtain in the front window and hung up the closed sign and locked the door. And in ten minutes everyone in Borgville knew that the bank robber had come back.

I was over at the Borgville Pharmacy having a chocolate malted and talking with Mollie Adams who was doing this and that back of the counter. I'd been dating Mollie—I hadn't had a chance, yet, to find out how emotionally unstable she was—and someone called in through the

back door that the bank robber was back in town and coming our way.

Mollie and I were still staring at each other when the stranger walked in. He was a nattily dressed, trim-looking man well past middle-age. There were streaks of gray in his hair, and the bags under his eyes had been there longer than overnight. He looked as if he'd been really handsome once, and he acted as if he thought he still was. He winked at Mollie, and said, "Hi, girlie, got any cigarettes?"

Mollie had a lemon-meringue pie on the counter that she'd just started cutting, and she picked it up and threw it at the stranger. He must've been five, six feet from her, but it smacked him squarely in the face, and Mollie ran out the back door and stood in the alley screaming.

The stranger grabbed some paper napkins from the counter and started wiping pie off his face and clothing. I'd like to tell you what he said but I won't. You don't hear that kind of language very often in Borgville, and I probably wouldn't get it right.

He cleaned himself off some and walked out. Next door to the pharmacy is the Borgville Garage. The service entrance was open, and the stranger saw a cigarette machine near the door. He walked in and started fumbling in his pocket for change.

Bob Adams was there, working on my jalopy, and of course someone had told him that the bank robber was in town. Bob didn't ask questions. He just threw the wrench he had in his hand. It wasn't such a good idea, because the wrench was heavy and Bob's hand was greasy. The wrench didn't go anywhere near the stranger. It broke the windshield on Doc Beyers' new Cadillac. As for Bob, he crawled under my jalopy and stayed there until all the excitement was over.

The stranger ducked out of the garage and walked on down the street to the Star Restaurant. Old Mr. Gregory was standing behind the counter, near the cash register. When he saw the stranger, he ducked down and crawled away on his hands and knees. And when the stranger walked up and looked over the counter, there wasn't anyone there.

Things were happening all over Borgville. Mr. Hanson, the bank president, sent his teller down in the basement and hung the *Bank Closed—Legal Holiday* sign on the door, and locked it. He locked the time vault and the back door too. Then he found a sack of money in the teller's cage that the teller had forgotten to put in the vault. He

was running in circles trying to figure out what to do when Fred Dimmit came down the alley to the back door with a bag full of money.

Fred had dumped all of his grocery store money into the bag, and he brought it down to the bank, because the bank's money was insured and his wasn't. He pounded on the back door, and shouted, "Let me in! I want to make a deposit!" Mr. Hanson shouted back at him, "The bank is closed!" They were still pounding and shouting at each other when the state police got there.

Sheriff Pilkins was one of the first to hear about the bank robber coming back, and the sheriff prides himself on being a pretty smart man. He said to himself, Why try to capture him uptown and destroy a lot of property, and maybe get some people shot? Why not set up a road block and capture him when he tries to leave?

The sheriff radioed a call to the state police, and then he collected a lot of shotguns and swore in as many deputies as he could find, and went out to the south end of town to set up a road block. Joe Hammer happened to come along in his tractor, pulling a trailer load of corn to the Farm Bureau, and the sheriff stopped him, and upset the trailer across the road, and blocked off one shoulder with the tractor. That still left the other shoulder, so the sheriff stopped Mike Wilkins and told him to put his Model T there. Mike's Model T didn't have much in the way of brakes, and so it slipped down into the ditch. Mike claims that now his Model T doesn't run the way it did before and he's threatening to sue the sheriff.

The stranger didn't know anything about this, of course. He came out of the Star Restaurant and hurried back up Main Street towards his car. People were peeking out of windows and doors watching him, but Grandfather was the only person in sight. He was still sitting in front of the barber shop, reading the paper. The stranger walked up and started to talk to him.

Just then Mrs. Pobloch, who lives up above the barber shop, stuck her husband's shotgun out the window and pulled the trigger. She said afterwards she wasn't trying to hit anything; she just wanted to scare the man away. She did that, all right. The blast went across the street and broke the window of Snubbs' Hardware Store, and the stranger tore back to his car and drove off.

Unfortunately for Sheriff Pilkins, the stranger drove out of town to the north, so the sheriff's road block didn't do any good. The only

thing it accomplished was to make the state police waste quite a bit of time at the south edge of town, while they waited for the sheriff to get Joe Hammer's trailer off the road. The sheriff said later that in the excitement he was thinking that the North Road still dead-ended on Manning's pasture.

As soon as the stranger left, a mob of people hurried out to crowd around Grandfather, which made him plenty mad. He said it was a fine thing when a man couldn't sit in the sun and read the paper without folks standing around staring at him. Everyone wanted to know what the stranger had said, and Grandfather told them, "He asked me if everybody in this town is nuts, and I asked him what he expected from a town full of Republicans."

That was all we could get out of Grandfather. When the state police finally got there and asked him about the bank robber, Grandfather said, "What bank robber?" They kept on asking him questions until he got disgusted and went home.

Things were kind of mixed up after that. People stood around arguing about what kind of a car the stranger had, and what color it was, and what he looked like. The only ones who'd gotten a close look at him, other than Grandfather, were Mollie and I. Mollie was too hysterical to remember anything, and I decided to play dumb. I said that the only time I saw him he had pie on his face, so of course I wouldn't recognize him.

I guess the state police would have agreed with the stranger about everyone in Borgville being nuts, if it hadn't been for Mr. Snubbs and Jeff Morgan. When Mr. Snubbs heard that the bank robber was back, he peeked out the door of his hardware store and wrote down the stranger's license number. And Jeff Morgan, who sinks just about every penny he gets ahold of into photographic stuff, went up to his sister's apartment above the bank with his camera and one of these telescope things, and got half a dozen good shots of the stranger walking down Main Street.

Most of us didn't know anything about that. And after the state police left, folks went back to whatever they'd been doing, and by the time the reporters got there Borgville had more or less decided to forget about the whole thing. The reporters had a tough time finding anyone who would answer questions.

I followed Grandfather home, and found him sitting on the front

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porch. He was acting grumpy, but I thought that was because he hadn't gotten to finish his paper while the sun was right.

"What was all the excitement about?" Grandfather said.

"You should know," I told him. "For the last twenty years you've been saying you'd recognize that bank robber if you ever saw him again, and naturally people got upset when you said he was back."

"Oh," Grandfather said. "*That* bank robber."

"What bank robber did you think it was?"

The only answer I got was a couple of grunts, so I went in the house. Five minutes later Nat Barlow came along. He started shouting when he was still half a block away. "Lookie here, Bill Rastin, you know derned well you told me that fellow was the bank robber!"

Grandfather didn't say anything, and Nat stormed up on the porch and stood there with his fists clenched. Nat's a frail old man, and if Grandfather had come up with a good, loud sneeze it would have knocked him over.

"What fellow?" Grandfather said.

"Why, that fellow who—who—"

Grandfather picked up the paper, and opened it up to an inside page in that lordly way he has when he's riled up about something. "Look," he said. "See that picture? Bank robber, it says. This fellow robbed a bank down in Mississippi, it says. You *can* read, can't you? I was reading the paper. Right here, I was reading, and you said, 'Who's that?' and I said, 'That's the bank robber.' Now take a good look. Isn't it the bank robber? Read this. Doesn't it say he's the bank robber?"

Nat stared at that picture for maybe two minutes, and then he turned around and stomped down the porch steps. He went around the house and out the back gate and sneaked home down the alley, realizing whose fault it really was.

Grandfather threw down the paper and went upstairs to his room. As soon as his door closed, I tore out on the porch to get that paper. I took a good look at the picture of the bank robber, and then I went upstairs to see Grandfather. He was sitting in the rocking chair in the corner of his room, smoking his corn cob. Usually he rocks about sixty per, but this time he was just sitting there.

"Gramps, there's something funny here," I said. "This paper—it's today's paper, but pages three and four and nine and ten are dated two weeks ago."

Grandfather took the paper and squinted at it. He looked confused, which for him is definitely normal. "Yeah," he said. "Just like them city slickers to try to peddle their old papers in Borgville. Snubbs ought to get his money back."

"I'll tell him about it," I said. I tucked the paper under my arm, and started for the door.

"Say, Chuck," Grandfather said. "I wouldn't bother Snubbs about this. As long as he didn't notice it . . ."

"Okay," I said. "I won't say anything."

I stood outside his door for a moment, waiting for the rocking chair to start up, but it didn't.

If you've read today's papers, you know how the state police caught up with the stranger a hundred miles upstate, and how they chased him for miles and finally cornered him at a road block, and how they found he was one Walter Donaldson that the F.B.I. had been wanting for a bank robbery that took place a month ago over in Illinois. That was quite a confession they got out of him, and of course one of the things he mentioned was that he'd robbed the Borgville Bank twenty years ago, and he'd gone back to Borgville to look the place over and see if he could do it again.

The reporters started coming before we were out of bed this morning, and they kept coming. They filled the living room, and I went up half a dozen times to try and get Grandfather to come down to talk to them. He was still sitting in his rocking chair, looking as if he'd been there all night, and I couldn't make him budge. And when one of the reporters sneaked around to the kitchen door and went up the back stairway, Grandfather told him the stranger hadn't looked anything like the man that robbed the Borgville Bank. When he tried to ask some more questions, Grandfather threw two pairs of shoes at him.

That reporter was plenty mad, but he quieted down when I told him Grandfather was just being modest—about recognizing the stranger.

Quite a few people from Borgville had dropped in by then, excited about the state police catching the bank robber. The reporters got the whole story—about how Grandfather had been the only person to get a good look at the bank robber twenty years ago, and how he kept saying for twenty years that he'd know him if he ever saw him again, and how he'd recognized the stranger the minute he drove up and told Nat

Barlow that there was the bank robber. Nat was there too, grinning and nodding his head, and the reporters seemed to think it was a pretty good story. I dug up a snapshot of Grandfather and took the negative over to Jeff Morgan, and he made prints for all the reporters.

When I got home, Mom was sitting in the kitchen, worrying because Grandfather hadn't come down to breakfast. He wouldn't come down to lunch, either, though he ate what I took up to him. And when I took him the afternoon papers to show him the big story and his picture on page one, and how they were saying he might get a reward, he shoved me out of his bedroom and threw the papers out after me.

"What's the matter with him?" I said to Mom. "He ought to be proud of himself. *I'm* proud of him."

Mom looked sad, and a little worried. "I think I finally understand, Chuck," she said. "And I've decided it'd be best if we don't say anything more about this. You see, this man Donaldson was a relatively young fellow when he robbed the bank. Dad recognized him the second he saw him yesterday, but when he got a closer look at him it probably shocked him to see how old he looked. Dad hasn't seemed to notice that the people he sees every day are getting older, and he can't understand how that young bank robber can now be a man well up in his fifties. He doesn't want to admit that that's possible, and it's worrying him terribly. He's started thinking about how old he's getting himself."

"All right," I said. "I won't mention it again." And I thought I wouldn't ever say anything either about that old newspaper Grandfather got, that had the picture of the bank robber in it.

I went out and sat down on the porch, and for the first time in my life I felt sorry for Gramps. Because I understood what he was doing up there, sitting in his rocking chair and not rocking.

He was looking in the bureau mirror.



Damon and Pythias and Delilah Brown

by Rufus King

Within this subtropical dreamland of alcoholic divorcees, in this bar-studded playground of the suspicious rich, in this Florida of sunshine; palm trees, nag and dogtracks, bars, jai alai, bolita, bookies, bars, surf-swept beaches, a moon, and bars, lived a young married lady with the first name of Delilah, her surname being Brown.

It happened that Delilah Brown was one of those special young women who crop up every now and again like Cleopatra or Circe or Pompadour or Gypsy Rose Lee, and who drive otherwise sensible men straight out of their wits.

In a case like hers mere looks do not matter, although Delilah had plenty, such as titian hair, deep-sea eyes, good bones and good bumps to go with them. It is the inner woman that counts, that certain ferrous quality, always in a state of magnetic flux, that can draw a man with even the trace of a nail in his head right into a condition of animal, mineral, and vegetable collapse.

The hunting ground through which Delilah scalped when off duty from her job as hostess in Grandmother Katy's Kitchen was the seaboard town of Halcyon, a homelike little community somewhat to the north of Miami. Apart from its seasonal glut of shrimp pink tourists, the place is inhabited largely by retired yankees, disillusioned motel owners, heat-baked construction workers, somewhat larcenous bar operators and an assortment of deep down Southern crackers.

(Word lore note: the term cracker in its Southern sense has nothing to do with a barrel or Nabisco. It derives from the early Florida settlers' prima donna habit of cracking their whips over the flanks of their oxen, mules, or horseflesh—and sharp-eared little Susie, as a consequence, saying to her pea-shelling mother, "Hark, Ma, here comes a

cracker," and Mother understanding her perfectly.)

Well, Delilah was a cracker and her husband Pythias Brown was a cracker and Pythias' construction-boss-and-best-friend Damon Lang was one too.

Although the boys' friendship was on a common plateau of unshatterable fondness, the economic stature of Pythias and Damon were far apart. The Langs had prospered abundantly through several generations of turpentine stands, citrus groves, and eventually valuable real estate, leaving the resultant boodle in Damon Lang's husky, well-molded hands—a provocative situation which more than frequently caused Delilah Brown to think, think turgidly.

If (she would turgidly think) I were married to Damon instead of to Pythias, I would have that kidney-bean-shaped swimming pool, that Jaguar and that 65-foot dream yacht, and I would have unlimited charge accounts at Burdines and at Jordan Marsh, instead of an installment rating at Sears Roebuck and a credit card with Texaco.

Damon, per se, never clearly entered the picture because men to Delilah were simply men—handy rungs on a ladder to an ultimate Monaco or an Aga Khan.

Now Delilah was not the type of girl who sits idly by and lets her dreams remain dreams. When she positively decided she wanted something she would put her well adjusted thinking cap on her titian hairdo and sort out all practical approaches to her goal. The basic solution to her immediate dream-compulsion was, naturally, for Pythias to be evaporated into outer space and for her ensuing state of pathetic widowhood to be rectified posthaste by a marriage with good, dependable, protective, and filthy rich Damon Lang.

What had sparked this lethal thought process into activity was the irritating announcement by Damon of his engagement to a svelte snowbird, a Miss Ethel Chalice, whose Westchester family wintered in Fort Lauderdale. Miss Chalice was generally considered by Delilah's coterie to fall loosely within the category of a female meat-head, due to her absurd interest in puppet shows, ceramics, ballet, Aldous Huxley, and kindred paranoiac subjects.

Delilah was not alarmed, she was simply spurred from a contemplative jog trot into a gallop. She was personally satisfied that the Chalice nuisance was little more than a resigned move on Damon's part of accepting second-best. He was definitely the marrying male, and as pal

Pythias had removed his one true passion (herself) from the market, a sensible ceremony with the Westchester drip was his best out. The wedding was scheduled for December, leaving Delilah a comfortable margin of three months for arranging her husband's encore act to the Sputniks.

How?

Suffocation? Blunt force? Gunshot? Ice pick? Rat poison? Delilah considered them all, judiciously chasing their drawbacks about in her clever young head while she seated and soothed and politely kidded the stuffed customers in Grandmother Katy's Kitchen, or as she glowed magnetically while downing several cool ones at a neighborhood tavern, or especially while she and Pythias were involved in the (to her) shopworn gestures of love after the two-o'clock curfew had eased them away from the taps.

It took about three weeks of speculative prospecting before she hit pay dirt, in what satisfied Delilah as a recipe for the perfect crime. Reasonably simple, enchantingly original—this it was—and leaving her grief-shocked self trimphantly in the clear.

All she needed was a goat.

Delilah pin-pointed this goat in the bulging, perspiration-moistened person of a Dr. Hillegas Dow. Dr. Dow was also a cracker—in fact, everyone concerned in this simple pastiche on homicide was a cracker except for the sheriff's deputy and the B.C.I. man who were shortly to be slapped with the case in the middle of a sopping wet and windy night. And, of course, the peripheral Ethel Chalice.

Delilah knew Dr. Hillegas Dow both inside and out, being on liquid terms of gossiping intimacy with a Mabel Oestringer who held down the job of nurse-receptionist at Dr. Dow's small clinic. Delilah knew him to be licensed in chiropody and as a naturopath, facts that apparently barred him from practicing in any of the hospitals, and that he had had to establish his private clinic in order to cash in. She was further happy in the conjecture that his professional ethics were as flaccid as a dying girdle and that his one-and-only god was the fast buck.

Definitely, Dr. Dow appeared not to be what even his kindest colleague would call a dedicated man. He was reputed to be far more interested in the pattings and pinchings of the comely than in therapeutically patting the ill. He was undoubtedly one of the exceptions to the rule that can be found in any line of professional work.

During a pre-dawn hour of the Wednesday-Thursday night of October 16th, while Pythias breathed deeply in guileless sleep, Delilah explored the pockets of his slacks and then arranged the first ingredient of her recipe for wishing him a bon voyage. Needless to say, it was not three cups of sifted flour.

The weather forecast for Halcyon and vicinity (said the 6 o'clock A.M. newscaster) *calls for fair skies and mild temperatures today and Friday . . .*

"Nuts," said Delilah, snapping off the radio set and getting back into bed.

"What did you say, sugar?" Pythias asked drowsily.

"I said nuts."

"Why?"

"Because the man said clear weather."

"Good. Damon and I have that job to inspect over on Bricknel."

"You got about one hour more sleep coming. Turn over and take it."

Friday:

The weather forecast for Halcyon and vicinity calls for partly cloudy skies today with occasional showers late tonight and Saturday . . .

"And just why only occasional?" Delilah said irritably, snapping off the set and getting back into bed.

Sunday:

The weather forecast for Halcyon and vicinity calls for cloudy skies and increasing showers over the weekend . . .

"That's better," said Delilah.

Sunday:

. . . A low-pressure area in the Caribbean will cause an increase in the rainfall both today and Monday. Motorists are advised to exercise special caution while . . .

"Now that's my boy," said Delilah, getting back into bed and landing a solid punch on the back of Pythias' solid neck to wake him up.

"How—when—what's the idea, sugar?"

"Do you know what day it is tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Well, what?"

"Monday. Look, Del; this is the one morning in the week when I can sleep—"

"What else day is it besides Monday?"

"Damon and I got that Harrison job to look over."

"And is that all that Monday October the twenty-first means to you?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"Wake up and listen to me, you bleak catfish. Monday is my birthday."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Sure, why. Last year it was in November. Come to think of it, the year before last it was June."

"So this year it's tomorrow."

"Del, honey, if it's that leopard-spotted velvet stole you're thinking about at Japeson's—"

"I am thinking about no leopard-spotted velvet stole at Japeson's or at any other cut-rate trap. I am thinking that tomorrow is my day off from Grandmother Katy's kind home for old mice, and that I want you and Damon to give me my yearly birthday party irregardless of the date."

"Okay, sugar. How about knocking it off now so I can get some sleep?"

"I want both you and Damon to take me for a charcoal broil at Tropical Joe's. Damon is marrying that pixy potroast-special in six or seven weeks, and this may be our last good party like old times. Just the three of us all alone together. Just Damon, just you, and just me."

"Look, babe, don't choke it to death. I said yes. I'll give him a buzz, if I can for one more time get back to sleep again."

And so with the few medical facts Delilah had gleaned from Mabel Oestringer, along with the rather less than flattering portraiture of Dr. Hillegas Dow, and with one pertinent bit of information she had casually lifted from Damon, and with the time now set for the launching, the deadly casserole was ready for the oven. Hot. 375 degrees.

"Wella, wella, well," said Tropical Joe with his celebrated originality as he watched Damon and Pythias and Delilah steer a homing-pigeon course from the wet doorway to the wet bar, "if it isn't the Three Muscatels."

Delilah smiled magnetically back at Joe's greeting and automatically counted the house: ten parboiled tourists, three deadpan crackers with their lady friends, and one stupefied ex-jockey with an Amazon lush. Not at all bad for a storm-flooded Monday night.

DAMON AND PYTHIAS AND DELILAH BROWN

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She herded her mutually devoted escorts through some sets of martinis (Pythias), manhattans (Damon), old-fashionedes (herself) and then over to a table for charcoal-broiled steaks and beer.

The long established pattern of their threesome get-togethers held, with Pythias and Damon absorbed in construction business chitchat, and Delilah occupied in stoking away the groceries and in exchanging the eye with any mobile individual in pants.

Several hours and a good many squat ones later, Delilah rang the departure bell. The pattern continued to hold. As usual, she drove. As usual, Pythias lapsed into a state of negligible consciousness on the seat between herself and the painlessly un-consolidated Damon.

Windshield wipers battled against a tropical downpour that blurred road visibility through a sheeting of water, and Delilah held the speed down to twenty-five while glissading over slick blacktop until, vague in the distance, a chaste neon sign announced the clinic of Dr. Hillegas Dow.

It was a lonesome span of road, made melancholy on one side by scrub palmettos and on the other by a hyacinth-choked canal. She had scouted the route several times before tonight, and knew exactly the location of a tall Gru-gru palm tree with its thorn-spiked trunk and large top of feather leaves that stood close by the entrance drive of the clinic.

Perfectly cool in her head, despite a warm lower down flush from the evening's liquid potpourri, Delilah swept a mental eye across this moment in which the show was to start. Her devoted consorts were both ripe for a good night's sleep with their eyelids already comfortably composed, a single-edged safety razor blade was ready in her bag, and the rain-lashed highway fore and aft was empty of traffic.

She took a skipper's look at the looming Gru-gru palm tree, depressed the accelerator, swung the wheel, braced herself, and muttered, "Gold Coast, here I come!"

The effects were reasonably spectacular. Pythias and Damon lunged in unison against the windshield, to their somewhat detriment, splintering it.

Delilah, having prepared herself against impact, suffered little beyond a momentary loss of breath. Swiftly, she took the single-edged razor blade from her bag. Swiftly, she used it. Then she jumped out onto the clinic driveway and started a crescendo of screams.

They were agreeably effective. Dr. Hillegas Dow emerged from the clinic and ran towards the screamer. He was followed by his nurse-receptionist, Miss Mabel Oestringer. By the time they reached the wrecked car, Damon had sufficiently recovered from shock to struggle out and take some befuddled steps over to Delilah, who adjusted herself about him warmly.

Delilah went into her act. It was important that she establish her concern for Pythias, and even though her gears remained enmeshed with Damon, she cried desperately to Dr. Dow, "Help Pythias! He's still in the car! He may be bleeding to death!"

It is interesting to note that Damon promptly dropped Delilah like a hot potato, even while her physical contact was shooting through him with bolts of fire. He lunged for the car. And even though both young men were of equal tonnage and size, Damon managed under the press of anxiety to extricate Pythias and to carry him on a trot towards the clinic, crying "Snap into it, Doc! He's bleeding like a stuck pig."

Dr. Dow snapped. What had initially struck him as being nothing more than an interesting motor accident was now translated into a source of cash; in what had been an otherwise cashless evening. First aid, he decided, then at least a week of expensive recuperation in the clinic.

"Shall I phone for an ambulance?" Mabel Oestringer suggested as she trotted beside him.

"Certainly not!" And Dr. Dow added, as a conscience-quieting clincher, "The man would be dead before an ambulance could possibly get here."

This made little sense to Mabel, but then little ever did beyond the delicious properties of vodka and her weekly take home pay of \$42.60.

Throughout this group-trot along the driveway, Delilah did not lose her impressario touch. She aligned herself beside Damon and established her loyalty as a wife by hysterically saying into Damon's closer ear, "If Pythias dies I'll kill myself. It was all because I didn't control the skid. And I'd rather end it all than go on living with the horrible thought."

It worked to an extent, for Damon called time out from his deep anxiety over Pythias, fleetingly, to admire Delilah's noble self-recrimination and noble anguish.

"Forget it, Del," he snapped soothingly, while hustling on with his

bleeding-to-death burden. "That road was pure vaseline. Even a bulldozer could skid on a night like this."

Within the clinic's antiseptic walls, the command post fell to Dr. Dow, and in all truth the doctor was neither a complete dud nor a quack.

He directed Damon to place Pythias on a surgical table, and was disturbingly aware that the situation was critical. Obviously, Pythias had lost and was losing a dangerous amount of blood from a wrist slash that had severed an artery. Odd, Dr. Dow thought abstractedly as he went about compressing the flow.

Odd, in the sense of the wound's location. The minor head and face lacerations were understandable, but unless Pythias had struck out in some witless moment of thrashing, and a shard of windshield glass had sliced the artery . . .

"He must have an immediate transfusion—and I mean immediate."

"I'll give it," Damon said, adding with earnest selflessness, "He can have my last drop."

"Have you ever donated, Mr. Lang?" Do you know your type?"

"Yes. Type A."

"You absolutely sure?"

Damon took out his wallet and leafed through its plastic compartments.

"Here, Doc. Take a look."

"Oh, stop quibbling and give it to him!" Delilah cried. "His poor, dear skin looks like a slice of boiled liver." Her agitated voice rose higher still. "Give him blood!"

"Miss Oestringer—"

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Please take Mrs. Brown into the waiting room and keep her there. Perhaps one of the yellow capsules."

"Yes, Doctor."

The clinic's waiting room was principally a matter of chairs, ash-tray stands, and Mabel Oestringer's desk. Mabel shook out a barbiturate.

"Want this, hon, or a slug?"

"Both," Delilah said.

Mabel produced vodka.

"Join you," she said, doing so, and then dialing the telephone.

"Who are you calling?"

"Sheriff's office."

"Why?" Delilah's voice held an edge.

"Well, somebody has got to, hon," Mabel said reasonably. "Anytime now, a patrol car will maybe spot the mix-up heap and will then ask why it was not reported and we'll be in a snit—oh, hello? Sheriff's office? Chuck? Well listen, honey boy, this is Mabel and . . ."

Some twenty minutes later honey boy blew in, with his big fullback body creating the effect of a minor atmospheric disturbance in the quiet room.

"Chuck, I want you should meet Mrs. Delilah Brown," Mabel said.

Chuck did so and suffered the usual male reaction upon first facing Delilah, of having been blasted by a pleasing boobey trap. This over, he said to Mabel, "Bill is down investigating the wreck. What gives in here?"

"Bill?" Mabel looked puzzled. "Isn't Bill B.C.I.?"

"He is. Happens Bill was in the office and losing his shirt at stud. He just came along for the ride. And now, ma'am, Mrs. Brown? Could I have just what happened?"

But Dr. Dow appeared and broke in upon Delilah's Sarah Bernhart interpretation of the dramatic night. Dr. Dow was both a bewildered and a badly shaken man.

He said, "He's dead."

It is fantastic how swiftly during a moment of absorbing triumph, disaster can strike and the tired old cliché about the cup that slips on its journey to the lip can get in its deadly licks.

Never had Delilah so richly enjoyed the sweet and pitless fruits of success. Beneath her Academy performance of just-widowed grief, she was one utterly satisfied and contented cat. She had even managed to radiate through her quiet sobbing a few hot shafts at Bill, the Bureau of Criminal Identification man, who had finished with his examination of the wreck and for the past twenty minutes had been closeted with Chuck and Dr. Dow in the room where Pythias was lying in the long sleep.

Twenty minutes?

Remotely, the length of time—for what after all should have been a simple look-see—was beginning to overlap Delilah's mood of total security. The thought seeped through her complacency: there is danger in that man. Something he knows. But how could he? And what? She

worked on the problem, while Damon's worthy right arm encircled and comforted her port side and Mabel bolstered up the starboard.

"I feel so lost—so alone," she sobbed.

"You've got me, Del," Damon said. "You've always got me."

"And me," Mabel said.

"Thank you, both of you," Delilah sobbed simply, while in her coldly calculating thoughts the questions continued: What does that man know? From the wreck? From what is taking place in that room in there right now?

The razor blade?

Scarcely. She had tossed it into the shrubbery, and on a storm-lashed night such as this . . .

"Pythias was my very best friend," Damon was saying in a voice charged with restrained emotion. "And you were everything to him, Del. It is my aim and my duty to shelter you as Pythias would shelter you, if—if he were still—"

Damon's honest baritone voice broke, and Delilah was engaged in the twin thoughts of how perfectly Damon was reacting according to plan and how silly were her unreasonable doubts when that B.C.I. man came back into the room with a purposeful stride.

Bill carried his six foot two inches of whipcord intelligence and superlative B.C.I. training over to the trio.

"With your permission, Mrs. Brown?" he said.

Without waiting for the permission but just taking it for granted, Bill lifted Delilah's bag from her lap and dumped out its contents onto the receptionist desk. His manner was so quietly assured, so officially confident of being within his legal rights (which he wasn't, and knew it) that the trio of competent young adults watching him were momentarily changed into hypnotically transfixed children.

He was about to pick up the wallet from among the trivia in Delilah's bag when his attention was caught by a small cardboard guard. He held it up carefully by its edges.

"You find these shields on new single-edged safety razor blades," he said.

Bill set it to one side back on the desk.

"The blade itself will be looked for," he said, "in the shrubbery near the wreck, after sunup."

"Damon, sugar," Delilah sobbed (she was still at it), snuggling closer

with Damon's arm, "what is the man talking about? Make him stop."

"Something in the nature of a razor blade was used to cut an artery in your husband's left wrist, Mrs. Brown," Bill said. "The location and nature of the wound rules out the probability of its coming from windshield glass."

Delilah froze into a cold, clear-thinking cube of ice.

"It *was* the windshield glass that made my dear, dead husband bleed. And what is more," she added, to restore the situation clinchingly back where it belonged, "I screamed my head off getting him help so that Dr. Dow could see to it that he got an immediate transfusion and his life be saved. Why should I move both heaven and earth to save him if I had been so foolishly cruel-hearted as to want him to bleed to death?"

"It was the transfusion that killed him," Bill said. "It was the transfusion that was *meant* to kill him, Mrs. Brown."

"Don't say that!" Damon cried in horror, releasing Delilah for the second time that evening like a hot potato. "My blood—no, not *the* blood I gave—"

"Yes, Mr. Lang. It was your blood that killed him. Wrong type. Mr. Brown died from cardiac and cerebral embolism due to your blood corpuscles collecting into clumps. Dr. Dow recognized the symptoms during the transfusion, when he had got over his shock and thought back about it—skin turning blue—rapid pulse—labored breathing—death—happens most likely when the donor's blood is type AB and the recipient's type is O. Cases on record about it."

"But Pythias's blood was type AB too. Same as mine," Damon said, drifting deeper into the horror of it all.

"No, his blood group was type O. Dr. Dow has just finished testing it."

"Dr. Dow don't know his blood-testing, or any other kind of testing, from horse feathers," Delilah insisted inelegantly. "My husband's type was AB. It's marked right on his driver's license."

Bill selected Delilah's license from its cellophane folder in her wallet.

He studied with satisfaction the small box in its lower right-hand corner labeled BLOOD TYPE. A space provided on licenses by the State of Florida, for the operator to print in his own blood group, for swift use in case of an automobile accident when an instant transfusion

would be required.

"I see that your type is B, Mrs. Brown. Did you print it in yourself?"

"I did and what of it?"

"Just that our handwriting expert will testify it matches the B you added on your husband's license—after you had changed the original O into an A by drawing a line down on either side of it and straightening its curved bottom into a crossbar. Like they change the cattle brands out west. Showed up plain under Dr. Dow's microscope, Mrs. Brown."

Bill added—as Damon groaned in tortured horror, and as Mabel plunged for the vodka, and as Delilah changed into a shrieking female—"Weirdest murder weapon I ever came across in my life."



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Glory Hunter

by Richard M. Ellis

When the buzzer buzzed at the front entrance, Homer Doyle set down his mug of lukewarm tea—he never drank coffee after midnight—and rose from his chair behind the desk. He crossed the lobby to the heavy glass door and clucked disapprovingly at the young man smiling in at him. He released the latch and pushed the door open a few inches.

"I thought my sister might have turned up," the young man said eagerly. "I know it's late, but—"

"Almost three o'clock in the morning," Homer Doyle said with some asperity. "Your sister isn't here. Perhaps she went to some other hotel."

The young man's sandy brows puckered in a frown. "No. She was definitely supposed to come straight here from the airport. I don't understand it."

"She might have met someone on the plane—"

"Oh, no. Betty isn't that kind of girl," the young man said, looking a bit shocked.

Doyle grunted dubiously. He had been night-clerking at the Cragmore, a small hotel for women, more than long enough to decide that almost any girl was that kind of girl. He said, "Well, I'm sorry, she just hasn't shown up. No one has checked in since you were here earlier."

He started to pull the door shut.

"Could I come in long enough to use the phone?" the young man asked. He gestured to the dark, deserted street stretching into the hot summer night on either side of the Cragmore's lighted entrance. "There doesn't seem to be another place open along here. I want to call the—the police. I really am worried about Betty."

Homer Doyle hesitated.

The Cragmore was run very much like the nearby YWCA; no male visitors were allowed inside the building after midnight, when the front door was locked. "Propriety" and "Cragmore" were synonymous.

Doyle nodded. After all, the boy was obviously only concerned with locating his sister, and there was a phone booth just inside the lobby.

Inside, the young man waited while Doyle shut and locked the door. The rather large lobby was in shadow; the only lights on were Doyle's reading lamp behind the registration desk, and the tiny yellow bulb above the elevator.

"Certainly different from when I was here before," the young man said. "The place was swarming with girls then."

Doyle nodded vaguely. The boy had come in around ten or ten-thirty last night, inquiring for his sister who had supposedly arrived in the city earlier in the evening.

Perhaps she had, but she hadn't checked in at the Cragmore. The young man, who had given his name as Bob Ed Lambeth, had hung around for several minutes with a sort of polite but dogged persistence until Doyle had gone through the registration cards twice with the same result. Finally, after a long look around the then busy lobby, the young man had left.

Now Doyle said, "The phone's over there. I suppose you've checked to make sure your sister's plane arrived on schedule last night?"

"What? Oh, yes." Lambeth fumbled in a pocket of his sports jacket. "I think I'll need change."

Doyle sighed and turned toward the desk. He took two steps, and then his head suddenly exploded in a great burst of white light followed by a shower of sparks that died into nothingness.

He woke to find himself in his familiar chair behind the registration desk, but with a most unfamiliar pain throbbing in his head. He groaned and tried to lift his hands. He couldn't move. He blinked dazedly up into the concerned face of the young man who had wanted to use the phone.

"Thank goodness," Lambeth said. "I was afraid I'd hit you too hard, Mr. Doyle."

"What—"

"Would you like a drink of water?"

Doyle shook his head, winced, and again tried to lift his hands. Then he saw that his arms were bound securely to the arms of the chair, with some kind of heavy cord that also encircled his chest, holding him firmly against the back of the chair.

Lambeth was saying, ("I'm sorry I had to slug you but I couldn't be sure you weren't carrying a gun or something. I had to play it safe."

"Gun?" Doyle said dazedly.

"After all, you are down here on the ground floor alone, and there's no house detective or anyone like that in the hotel; just you and the manager, Mrs. McVey, and of course she's fast asleep in her room up on the top floor."

Along with the throbbing in his head Doyle began to feel anger, most of it directed at himself. This kid with his guileless air and fresh-scrubbed face had taken Doyle in completely.

Doyle swore under his breath. Then he glanced toward the small safe set into the wall behind the desk. The safe had been closed, but not locked; now its door was ajar.

Doyle snapped, "I see you've cleaned out the cash box. I hope the fifty bucks you found in there is enough, because that's all there is."

Lambeth didn't appear convinced. "I don't—"

"Of course, I might have all of five dollars in my wallet," Doyle added bitterly.

"Six, as a matter of fact," said Lambeth, with a deprecating smile. "I searched you while you were unconscious. I also found a gun in this little drawer under the counter here. I'll just take that along . . . But I'm really not interested in money, or guns. This is what I was looking for." From the desk he picked up four sheets of stiff paper, floor plans of the hotel, one for each of the four upper floors. Small removable tags indicated which rooms were occupied and which were not.

Doyle stared.

Lambeth said lightly, "No, I'm not still trying to find my sister. Actually, I imagine Betty's sound asleep at this hour, in her own bed at home. Way out in Seattle, Washington. She really did stay here once, though, when she came east on a visit. She told me all about this place. Thought it was very nice. Very quiet and respectable."

Doyle frowned uncertainly at the young man. He noticed that in spite of Lambeth's casual chatter and outwardly calm manner, there was a sheen of perspiration on his face, and his hands were trembling.

"You've got all the cash in the place," Doyle said. "Why are you hanging around?"

"It's not quite three-thirty yet," said Lambeth, nodding toward the wall clock. "There's nothing to do but wait."

"Wait for what?"

Lambeth made an abrupt gesture. "Do you like this job?"

"Now, listen—"

"It sounds like it would be—interesting. Night clerk in a hotel for women, one man alone with all these girls. I'll bet you could write a best-selling book about your experiences, huh? Even at your age, it must be interesting."

"Are you kidding?"

Lambeth shrugged, his pale gaze again flicking to the clock. He took off his jacket and folded it neatly over a corner of the desk.

He said, absently, "I suppose if you were the lecherous type, you wouldn't have this job in the first place. Not in a respectable place like this is supposed to be . . . Well, it's almost time. I'll just—"

"Time for what?" Doyle cried. "What the hell is all this?"

As he spoke, Doyle struggled against the cord that bound him to the chair and discovered that there was a certain amount of give in the loops encircling his left arm and the arm of the chair on that side. He immediately stopped his efforts; Lambeth didn't seem to notice.

Lambeth was busy. He had taken off his shirt, and Doyle saw that the young man's naked, hairless chest was covered with curious designs done in greasepaint; jagged streaks of red and green radiating from a bright yellow spiral.

Now Lambeth took a tiny mirror and a stick of yellow greasepaint from his trousers' pockets and carefully drew crude stars on his clean-shaven cheeks and a sunburst on his forehead.

—Doyle watched, his eyes bulging.

"Just an added touch," Lambeth said, with an embarrassed grimace. "It's the kind of thing that goes over big in the newspapers."

"Sure. Uh-huh," said Doyle soothingly. Until now he had been more annoyed at his own gullibility than afraid of Lambeth. The kid was hardly the type to inspire terror, but if he was a psycho, that was something else again.

Lambeth eyed the clock. "Three-thirty. Good. That's the time my father died, some years ago. Three-thirty on a hot summer morn-

ing . . . He died of acute alcoholism, Mr. Doyle. Driven to it by my mother. How does that grab you?"

Doyle tried to moisten his dry lips with a tongue that felt like parched leather. "I—I'm sorry—"

Lambeth burst out laughing. "Don't be. Just between us, my old man died of a coronary, but the other way sounds much more interesting."

"Sure."

"Well, to work," Lambeth said briskly. "I've looked at these floor plans. I believe the top floor is best. I see there are seventeen guests on that floor, most of them in single rooms. That'll make it easier, you know."

"What are you—"

"See, I can go quietly from room to room, using this master key I found in the safe. With just one girl to deal with in each room—except in a couple of cases where there are two—there won't be any unnecessary uproar or bother."

Doyle shook his aching head. He wondered if he might be having some kind of weird hallucination; but the pain was real enough, and so was the needle-pointed ice pick that Lambeth had taken from a sheath attached to his belt.

Doyle sat there, frozen, while the young man tucked the chart of the top floor under one bare arm and with a casual nod walked around the end of the desk and started across the lobby. He was humming softly.

"Wait," Doyle croaked. "Listen, you can't mean—"

"Sure I do," Lambeth said, his face shining with sweat and greasepaint. "What the heck, I'll soon be twenty-four, and who's ever heard of Robert Edward Lambeth? Nobody. But in a few hours, Mr. Doyle—in a few hours I'll be the most famous man in the country—in the world."

"But—"

"I'll be down as soon as possible. Then I'll untie you, and we can call the television stations and the newspapers—and the cops, I suppose." Lambeth grimaced. "Don't worry about a thing, Mr. Doyle. After all, you'll be the man who took my surrender. Wish me luck."

Lambeth reached the elevator and slid open the door. He stepped inside and, with a last cheerful nod, punched the button and the door slid shut.

Whimpering, Doyle strained and tugged at the cord; almost at once his left arm was free.

"My God," he panted. "Seventeen—he'll kill . . ."

Now his right arm was free, and only the cumbersome loops of cord around his chest held him in the chair. If he could free himself before the elevator reached the top floor, there was an emergency switch that would override the controls inside the elevator itself, stopping it between floors. If Doyle could just reach that switch in time . . .

He glared across the dim lobby at the indicator above the elevator door. The hand of the indicator was moving slowly past 2 and on toward 3.

Doyle tried to stand up but he was still entangled in the stiff new cord. He groaned.

That psycho would kill those women, one by one, entering their rooms and stabbing them with that ice pick before they knew what was happening, and Doyle had no doubts remaining that Lambeth meant to do just that. Seventeen . . .

It would be the most horrible crime . . .

Lambeth would be famous, all right. Oh, yes!

At last Doyle was able to stand up partially, his eyes glued to the elevator indicator; it had reached 3, and there was only 4—and then 5, the top floor.

There was still time, though. The switch was on a panel in an alcove behind the desk; only a few steps from where Doyle was struggling to push the last loop of the cord down past his hips so that he could step out of it.

Famous? Lambeth would be more than famous. There would be hours of television about him, miles of newsprint devoted to him, magazine articles, books—if Homer Doyle didn't stop him in the next few seconds.

And what about the man who caught Lambeth? Right now it would mean nothing. But afterwards, after seventeen murders . . . That man would be almost as famous as Lambeth!

Doyle stood there in a sudden blinding agony of indecision.

Then, slowly, he sank back into the chair. He stared in fascination at the elevator indicator. Then he slowly pulled the last loop of the cord back up around his waist.

After all, not only the young have dreams of glory.

Perfectly Timed Plot

by E. X. Ferrars

Rina Evitt's eyes were stretched wide with fear. Staring across the room at her husband, they were not quite focused.

"It'll never work," she said shrilly. "Never."

"It'll have to." Harry Evitt's voice was as empty of feeling as hers was charged with it. His nervousness was in his feet. With one heel, he was trying to kick a hole in the costly gray rug before the fire. "Yes, it'll have to," he said without excitement, without doubt, without eagerness.

Rina dropped her head into her hands. Her hair tumbled over them as her fingers clawed her bursting temples. She had thick, bleached hair, with a sheen that was bright but lifeless. Her face was long, with slackly handsome features and big, wide-spaced eyes.

"I'll make a mess of it—there isn't time—there's too much to remember."

Knowing what she could do when she tried, her husband was not much troubled.

"You'll remember, all right," he said. "It's just the timing that matters. The rest's easy. But make sure you get the timing right."

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, dug the back of one heel into a new patch of the rug and gave a fierce twist to his foot.

"You've got to be sure the others leave on time," he said. "And you've got to be sure you get Minnie out into the drive with them, to see them off, so that you can come back in here and change the clock and make that telephone call without her knowing. And you've got to time that exactly. But the rest of it's easy."

Rina jerked her head up, staring at him again.

He was a man of middle height, softly covered in flesh, dressed in a

dark gray suit, a white shirt, a dark blue tie, all good, all inconspicuous. He had a round, white face, moulded into insignificant features, and had thinning dark hair brushed back from a low curved forehead.

With her eyes on that calm, dull face, Rina said, "You haven't just thought of all this, Harry—not just today. You've had it ready for a long time, in case George ever found out about the money. You have, haven't you?"

"All right, I've had it ready," Evitt said. "And a good thing I did, I'd say."

"You've had it all ready, yet you never told me . . ."

"You know that's what I'm like," he said. "You ought to be used to it by now."

She swayed her head from side to side, not quite shaking it, not quite nodding. Crouched in her chair, shrunk into herself, she looked small, helpless and harmless. In fact, she was a tall woman, thin, but big-boned and strong. But her apprehension had dwarfed her.

"I'm not used to it," she said, "I never shall be."

Evitt's pale pink lips twitched at the corners in a faint expression of satisfaction. But life never remained long in his face.

"Remember—get them all out into the drive," he said, coaching her again with patience, with understanding, but with relentlessness. "Then run in and change the clock and make the telephone call. Make sure Minnie stays outside long enough for you to do that. Get her worrying about the roses. Or fertilizers. Anything. You can handle her."

"But the other part of it," Rina said, "suppose *that* doesn't work. Suppose—"

"It will."

"No, it's too difficult. It's too complicated. There are too many things to go wrong." Her voice had leapt again into shrillness.

After a short silence, Evitt answered evenly. "All right then, what do we do instead?"

When she did not answer, he said, "Go and get changed now, Rina. Put on your green dress. Get the room ready. There isn't much time to spare."

She looked round dazedly. "The room's all right, isn't it? Just as usual."

"The room's fine." His pride in the room escaped into his voice for a moment.

It was a room of which they were both proud. The floor was of mahogany woodblocks. The picture window showed them a sweep of lawn, some early daffodils blooming in rough grass under bare trees, distant roofs and still more distant hills, the tranquil English countryside. The antique furniture had been bought after careful study of the best magazines. There was central heating.

"The tea's all ready," Rina added. "I've just got to get out the bridgetable and the cards."

"Get them out then," Evitt said. "Keep busy. Don't sit and think. It won't help you."

"And you . . . ?"

He walked over to her. He put his hands under her elbows and with slow deliberation hauled her up out of her chair.

"Don't think about me either, my dear."

She was slightly the taller of them, even without her high heels. Face to face with him now, she could look over his head to the window, to the cluster of leafless trees and the gray-green line of the low hills beyond them.

"You can do it, Rina," he said, his hands tight on her arms. "I am certain of it."

"I suppose I can do it," she said. "But I don't like it."

"Do you think I like it?"

He did not like it. He was terrified of what he had to do and of what might result from it for himself and for Rina. He was a calculating rather than a violent man. But calculations can go very easily wrong, and then what is there left but violence?

Rina's bridge-party broke up at six o'clock. It always did. Two of the four women who met every Wednesday to play had to catch a bus home from the end of the road at ten minutes past six. So when the hands of the grandfather clock in the corner pointed to ten minutes to six, the losers groped in their handbags, paid out shillings and pence to the winners, re-hashed the blunders and disasters of the last rubber and made peace with each other. It was a scene which repeated itself week after week.

"Not my lucky afternoon," Minnie Hobday said in a tone of unusual heaviness. She smoothed back one of her straying locks of gray hair, but left several others, disturbed by the high wind of play, to droop

around her square, mild face and support its gentle, sheepdog quality. "I'm getting too old for this game."

Rina, sitting on her left, scribbling on a scoring-pad before her, tapped Minnie on the wrist with her pencil, a gesture that Rina seemed to be fond of. The pencil was of emerald green, tipped with gilt, and matched the emerald green woolen dress and the heavy gold bracelet of intricate design that she was wearing:

"It isn't age that's the trouble," she said, smiling. "You've got something on your mind, Minnie. Isn't that so?"

"No, it's age," Minnie Hobday said insistently. "I never had much of a memory for cards, and soon I suppose, in just a few years, I shan't have any at all."

The truth was, however, that she had a great deal on her mind, that she was very worried, because for the last three days her husband George had barely spoken to her, and today he had gone to London without telling her the reason, all of which was decidedly quite unlike him.

But even if Minnie had reached the stage of wanting to confide in someone the terrible suspicion that had been torturing her all day, the suspicion that George was not well, that he had symptoms so fearful that he had not been able to bring himself to tell her about them, but had gone off alone to London to consult a specialist, it would never have occurred to her to confide in Rina Evitt. Though the two women had never had a quarrel, and during the five years since Rina's marriage to George's partner in the firm of Hobday and Hobday, auctioneers and estate agents, had made a habit of these weekly bridge afternoons, and of performing all sorts of small neighborly acts for one another, Minnie had never even begun to grow intimate with the younger woman.

She was sorry for this. It would have been far better for all of them if she and Rina had been able to become as friendly as George was with Harry. But Rina, so Minnie, blaming herself, explained it, was young, was smart, had travelled, and apparently, in other places, had known really interesting people. So she could hardly be expected, could she, to be anything but bored by Minnie Hobday?

Minnie had always been aware of the boredom in Rina, of the emptiness; of the need for something more than she had. And it was Minnie's belief that it would always be for more and more. Whatever Rina

had would never be enough. Still, it had been clever of Rina to realize that she had something on her mind. Ordinarily, she seemed so wrapped up in herself, so like a child in a daydream, that you would no more expect her to notice a shade of worry on an elderly face than, come to think of it, you would expect her, all of a sudden, to be interested in the names of two undistinguished shrubs, growing near the gate, and which had been growing there for years.

So perhaps something was happening in Rina, some change, some development. That would be nice, Minnie thought, walking out to the gate with the other two women, and identifying the shrubs as a *laurus-tinus* and a *hypericum uralum*. But turning to Rina to tell her this, Minnie found that she had just turned back into the house, and this surprised her, somewhat.

Minnie did not leave then, for George had said that he would call for her on his way home from the station, and Rina was expecting her to wait for him. Returning to the house, Minnie found Rina setting a tray with a decanter and four glasses on it on the low, tile-topped coffee-table.

"I didn't see why we should wait for the men," Rina said. "A drink is what you need to cheer you up a bit. I suppose it's Michael you're worrying about, but you shouldn't, you know. He's all right, that boy. I'm fond of him."

Michael was the Hobdays' son, and because of a certain carelessness that he had sometimes shown in the handling of a fast car, he had more than once given his parents cause to worry about him. But recently he had been almost sensible.

"No, I'm not worried about Michael," Minnie said. "Really, I'm not worried about anything." She took the glass that Rina held out to her and glanced at the clock. George should be here at any moment, she thought; the suspense of the long day, thank heavens, would soon be over.

However, it was not as late as she had thought that it must be, or so she believed until, a minute or two later, she happened to glance at her watch.

In surprise, she exclaimed, "That clock's wrong, Rina!"

"Not *that* clock," Rina said emphatically.

"It is, it's ten minutes slow," Minnie said. "George ought to be here."

Rina shook her head. There was a smile in her wide-spaced candid eyes. "It's the most reliable thing on earth, Minnie, and so it should be, considering what care Harry takes of it—and what he paid for it."

"But this watch of mine is quite reliable too. I've had it for twenty-two years, and I never had to adjust it more than about two minutes in a month." Because of her worry, Minnie sounded querulous. "It's a very good watch. And the thing is, it always has been."

Rina turned to the fire. She stirred the smoldering logs with the toe of her shoe. Her pale hair, swinging forward, hid her face and its tense expression.

"Perhaps it needs cleaning," she said.

"I had it cleaned two months ago. No, I'm sure it's the clock that's wrong. George ought to be here . . ." The sound of strain in her voice checked Minnie.

"All right," Rina said equably. "I'll tell Harry. But talking of Michael, he's a crazy thing, but really so nice. Everyone thinks so. And even if he and George do cross one another, at times, you shouldn't make up your mind it's all Michael's fault."

Frowning vaguely, Minnie wondered why Rina kept dragging Michael in. "I don't know what you mean about him and George crossing one another," she said. "They're ever such good friends nowadays. Of course, Michael went through a difficult time. All boys do." She stopped, because she thought that she had heard footsteps outside on the gravel.

Rina had heard them too. "There's Harry," she said.

"Or George." Relying on her watch rather than on the Evitts' clock, Minnie believed that her husband's train must have reached the station about ten minutes ago, and she knew that by the short cut across the fields, he needed only five minutes to reach the Evitts'-house.

"Yes—or George," Rina said, and with long strides went quickly out of the room.

Nervous and impatient, thinking of the dire news that George might be bringing her, Minnie made one of her random selections of an untidy lock of hair and smoothed it back from her forehead. At the same time she did her best to arrange a placid smile on her face. But it was Harry Evitt, not George, who received the smile.

"Ah, Minnie!" he said with pleasure.

"Good evening, Harry," she said. "You haven't seen George, I sup-

pose? He was going to call in for me."

Evitt looked at the clock.

"Wasn't he coming on the six-twenty? That's only just due now."

"But that clock's slow," Minnie said. "It's half past six."

"*That* clock isn't slow," Evitt said, almost as Rina had said before him.

In a shriller voice, as if it mattered which was wrong, the Evitts' clock or her watch, Minnie said, "Well, by my watch it's half past six already. George ought to be here. He said he was going to come straight here and not go to the office."

The Evitts exchanged puzzled glances.

"Well, let's check it on the telephone," Harry Evitt said. "You may be quite right, Minnie. If you are, I expect it's just that the train's late, but if you like, I'll walk to the station and just make sure . . . make sure . . ." He stopped, as if he were uncertain of precisely what, in the circumstances, he ought to make sure.

Rina had already gone to the telephone. She picked it up, spoke into it and put it down again.

"The operator says it's six-twenty-one by the clock in the exchange," she said, and picking up the glass of sherry that she had left behind when she had gone out to meet her husband, she drank it down and began to choke.

Evitt hit her between the shoulders. The sound his hand made, striking her, was surprisingly loud and hollow-sounding.

Wiping moisture from her eyes, Rina said hoarsely, "It's really Michael Minnie's worried about. That row they had."

"That was nothing," Evitt said. "Nothing at all. Have some more sherry, Minnie. George'll soon be here."

But even an hour later, George had not as yet arrived at the Evitts' house.

The Evitts said that he must be coming on a later train. Minnie agreed with them, and decided not to wait for him any longer. Evitt saw her down the short lane to her home. He went with her as far as her gate, then walked off into the darkness, while Minnie walked up the path to the door, a door set in a jutting Victorian porch, that opened into a roomy but drably papered hall, across which an electric clock faced her, noisily whirring. Comparing her watch with the clock, she saw that her watch was fast, but only by three minutes.

That was at seven-forty.

At seven-fifty-five the police arrived. George had not come home by a later train. He had returned from London, as he had said that he would, on the six-twenty, the ticket-collector quite clearly remembering his handing in his ticket. Then George had started to walk across the fields, directly to the Evitts' house.

At the time when his body was discovered, under a hedge and with his head battered in, he had been dead for at least an hour.

Detective Inspector Ronald Tewson was very interested in Minnie's watch. Had she or had she not re-set it at the Evitts' when she found that it and their clock did not agree? But Minnie by then was not in a state to give him an answer on which he could place much reliance.

In grief, at first, she had maintained a dreadful, vacant composure. She had told the police all that she could, but had grown quietly more dazed and incoherent, till her son Michael, a tall boy of nineteen, who had been summoned home from a cinema, had led her upstairs to her room and the doctor had given her an injection that made it possible for her to rest.

As he watched her go, not losing her gentle restraint, but only her mind, Tewson, who could almost deceive himself that he could take murder in his stride, felt something in himself that he dreaded, the sense of pressure, caused, as he knew, by extreme anger. For this, he was certain already, was a cold-blooded crime, and of all kinds of crime, that was the kind that made his own blood hottest. But with that anger in him, he always wore himself out, suffered more than was useful to anyone, and jumped to unwarranted conclusions. The unwarranted conclusion to which he jumped before that night's work was over was that George Hobday had been murdered by his partner, Harry Evitt. All that funny business about the clock and the telephone call to the exchange . . . It was too convenient. But Tewson was not going to have anyone else saying anything of that sort yet.

"We haven't a thing against Evitt at the moment," he said dourly to Sergeant James Geary, at one o'clock in the morning, as the two men gulped tea in Tewson's office. "That's the fact. Not a solid thing except that Mrs. Hobday doesn't think she reset her watch before she got home. Doesn't *think* so!" He shook his head despairingly. "A solid fact, d'you call that?"

Geary was a younger, heartier man than Tewson.

"Look," he said, "it's the telephone call that's the only trouble, isn't it? The fact that they've confirmed it at the exchange that Mrs. Evitt did ring up and ask the time at six-twenty-one—which made the Evitts' clock right and Mrs. Hobday's watch wrong, and put Evitt right here in the room with Mrs. Hobday when Hobday's train got in, and for an hour afterwards. That's all that worrying you, isn't it?"

Tewson nodded his head, in furious parody of a definite nod of agreement.

"Of course a little thing like motive doesn't worry me," he said, his lips drawn back in a tight, ugly smile.

"You'll find that in the books of the company, I shouldn't wonder," Geary said. "There's been talk around for some time, about where Evitt was getting his money from. When you've talked to that accountant Hobday went to see in London . . ."

"Go on and teach me my job," Tewson said. "It's that telephone call you're going to put me right on, isn't it?"

"There were two telephone calls," Geary said.

"That's right," Tewson said, "there probably were. One to the exchange and one to nowhere, and the one Mrs. Hobday heard was the one to nowhere. It could have been like that. Only if it was, I don't like it."

Geary was disappointed that his thinking had already been done for him.

"Why not?" he asked. "It's nice and simple."

"Simple!" Tewson said, as if the mere sound of the word made him ill.

"Look," Geary said, "they arrive for the bridge-party—Mrs. Hobday and the two other women—and they play for a couple of hours. All three have got watches, but not one of them says anything then about the clock being slow. And the party breaks up at the usual time, because two of them have to catch a bus. And they all go out in the garden together to see the two ladies off, and Mrs. Hobday also goes to look at some shrubs, because Mrs. Evitt suddenly got interested in knowing what they are. But for some reason, instead of going with Mrs. Hobday to look at the shrubs, Mrs. Evitt doubles back into the house, and when Mrs. Hobday follows her, she's setting out drinks in the living room. But by then Mrs. Evitt had three or four minutes to

herself, and that would be plenty to ring up the exchange, get told that the time was six-twenty-one, then put the hands of the clock back to six-ten. Well then, presently Evitt comes in. It's really six-thirty, and he's met Hobday at the station, started across the fields with him, done him in and gone on home. But the clock says it's only six-twenty, and when Mrs. Hobday says the clock's wrong, they make a fake call to the exchange which convinces the old lady for the time being that her watch is wrong. Now tell me what's the matter with that?"

"Only that her watch wasn't wrong when she got home," Tewson said, "or only three minutes wrong, which doesn't signify. Or—" he rubbed the side of his jaw thoughtfully "—or I should say doesn't seem to."

"But it's her watch not being wrong that proves all this," Geary said.

Tewson gave a weary shake of his head. "Evitt—a man like Evitt—he'd have thought of that, Jim. But when we saw him, he wasn't scared. Things had worked out just as he meant them to. So he's got something else up his sleeve, and that means there's something else coming, something for us to trip over and send us flat on our faces. Yes . . ." Tewson stopped as the telephone rang at his elbow, then, as he reached for it, repeated somberly, "Yes, something else is coming."

His conversation on the telephone lasted for some minutes. When it was over, he looked expressionlessly at Geary, then leaned back in his chair, stared up at the dingy ceiling and muttered, "Didn't I say something else was coming?"

"What was it?" Geary asked.

"That was young Hobday," Tewson said, "His mother's watch is now thirty-five minutes fast. In about six hours, it's gained nearly half an hour. What do you make of that, Jim?"

In disgust, Geary exclaimed, "That means her watch *was* wrong at the Evitts'. She must have re-set it there and forgotten doing it. And it had already gained another three minutes by the time she got home. It's hopelessly out of order. Or did anyone get a chance to tamper with the watch?"

"The boy says not. He says she talked to him quite sensibly for a little while when he got her alone before the injection hit her, and she was quite sure no one had had a chance to tamper with it."

"Then you aren't going to be able to swash Evitt's alibi so easily, are you?"

"Because of the sheer coincidence that her watch, her good watch, that she's had for twenty-two years, went wrong the same evening as her husband was murdered?" Still staring at the ceiling, onto which, at one time or another, he had projected most of his problems, Tewson shook his head. "No," he said definitely.

"Then someone did tamper with it—stands to reason someone did," Geary said.

"Yes."

"The boy?"

"Why?"

"Working with Evitt, perhaps. There's this story that he was on bad terms with his father."

"The Evitts' story. No one else supports it."

"But then . . ." Geary found himself staring at the ceiling. But he was unable to draw from it the inspiration that Tewson seemed to find there. Once more he fixed his eyes on Tewson's face, which at that moment was almost as gray, as lined and as blank as the ceiling which he was able to put to such good use.

"But then no one but Mrs. Hobday could have tampered with the watch," Geary said. "Mrs. Hobday herself. Only why should she do it? She seemed fond of her old man. So why should she do that to protect Evitt?"

"Just let me think, Jim," Tewson answered. "Just let me think."

In the morning, Harry Evitt did not go to the office. He knew that this was a mistake, but he was afraid to leave Rina by herself. The day before she had done her part well. Both in the handling of Minnie Hobday and of the police, she had shown the nerve and resourcefulness which he had known would be roused in her by excitement and the presence of an audience. But in the morning, after a night quite without sleep, alone in the house, she was not to be trusted.

He knew that she ought to go round to the Hobdays' house to inquire after Minnie, but he doubted if he could make her go. She clung to him, needing to be continually reassured that all had gone as he had planned. So when, in the middle of the morning, the police reappeared, Evitt felt from the start at a disadvantage. He felt that he must explain his own presence at home, when surely, of all times, he was needed at the office, and that he must apologize for Rina's failure to be

the kind, concerned friend of the bereaved woman that would have seemed only natural under the circumstances.

"My wife's so upset, Inspector . . . A bad night . . . Perhaps a prowler around somewhere . . . Afraid . . . You understand . . ."

The words limped out uncertainly. They weren't the right words, Evitt knew, even as he produced them. A murderer should never explain or apologize.

What made it worse was that, for all the notice that Tewson seemed to take, Evitt might not have spoken at all. Tewson had followed him into the living room, had nodded briefly to Rina, who had risen from her chair by the fireplace, then she had stood glancing around the room with the air of looking for something. The fact that he had the air of knowing just what he was looking for made Evitt's plump hands turn to ice.

He crossed to Rina's side. Standing on the gray hearth-rug with his shoulder touching hers, he reached automatically for the warmth of the fire. But yesterday's wood fire, for decorative purposes only in the well-heated room, was a heap of ashes.

"I came to tell you," Tewson said, "that Mrs. Hobday has withdrawn the statement she made to us yesterday evening that your clock was wrong. She believes now it was her watch that was wrong. Since it was practically speaking right when she reached home, she suspected you at first of having altered your clock and lied to her about your call to the exchange, in order to create a false alibi for yourself. But she now believes she must have unthinkingly re-set her watch while she was here."

Tewson had been looking at the grandfather clock while he was speaking, but now his eyes rested on Evitt's face.

Evitt gave a grave nod, almost a bow. He was striving to assume a solemnity of sorrow for his dead friend and partner. It made a certain slowness of utterance, while he chose his words, seem understandable. But it was difficult to keep his feet still.

"I see," he said. "May I ask what made her change her opinion?"

"Her watch went on gaining after she got home," Tewson said.

"Ah, I see. Just an unfortunate coincidence, then."

"Was it?" Tewson gave a tightlipped, ferocious smile. Then he moved away. He crossed to the telephone and stood looking down at it. "That's what she herself believes it was. An unfortunate coinci-

dence. But I'm not sure . . ." He had picked up a little writing-pad from beside the telephone, the kind of pad intended for the jotting down of messages. From across the room its cover had looked as if it were of tooled leather, of emerald green and gold. But in fact it was of painted metal, cold to the touch of his fingers. "I'm not sure that I agree with her. Mrs. Evitt, what did you do with the pencil that belongs to this pad?"

Rina started. Evitt could feel the trembling begin in the arm that was pressed against his. But her voice was only a very little higher than usual. No one who did not know her well would have noticed it. With an audience to play to, he thought, you could always rely on her.

"The pencil?" she said. "Why, I—I don't know. Isn't it there?"

"I mean the pencil," Tewson said, "a green and gold pencil, with which, as Mrs. Hobday told me this morning, you kept tapping her wrist yesterday afternoon, her left wrist, all the time you were playing bridge—tapping her watch too pretty often, of course."

"Did I do that?" Rina asked. "I don't remember. Oh, but you don't mean that *that* could have upset her watch?"

Evitt took it up quickly. "No, Inspector, surely you aren't suggesting that you can deliberately make a watch go wrong—because I take it that that's what this might imply—by giving it gentle little taps with an ordinary pencil?"

"Not with an ordinary pencil, no," Tewson said. "That isn't what I'm suggesting. But I know these pads. The pencils that go with them have magnets in them. That's to make them hold onto the metal covers of the pads, the idea being that you won't mislay them. Neat, if you can be bothered with that sort of thing. And if you keep on tapping a watch with a quite powerful magnet, you can make it go very wrong indeed. You can't tell *how* wrong, of course. You can't tell if it'll go fast or slow or stop altogether. All you can be pretty sure of is that with that magnet drawing at the works, they're going to be badly enough upset to make the watch useless as evidence against a fine old clock like that and a faked call to a telephone exchange. Now where is that pencil, Mrs. Evitt?"

There was silence in the room. For a moment the Evitts stood close to one another, both tense, wary and wooden-faced. Then Rina drew away from her husband, clawed suddenly at his round, empty face with her nails and started to scream at him.

by Jack Ritchie

I was doing about eighty, but the long flat road made it feel only that fast.

The red-headed kid's eyes were bright and a little wild as he listened to the car radio. When the news bulletin was over, he turned down the volume.

He wiped the side of his mouth with his hand. "So far they found seven of his victims."

I nodded. "I was listening." I took one hand off the wheel and rubbed the back of my neck, trying to work out some of the tightness.

He watched me and his grin was half-sly. "You nervous about something?"

My eyes flicked in his direction. "No. Why should I be?"

The kid kept smiling. "The police got all the roads blocked for fifty miles around Edmonton."

"I heard that too."

The kid almost giggled. "He's too smart for them."

I glanced at the zipper bag he held on his lap. "Going far?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

The kid was a little shorter than average and he had a slight build. He looked about seventeen, but he was the baby-face type and could have been five years older.

He rubbed his palms on his slacks. "Did you ever wonder what made him do it?"

I kept my eyes on the road. "No."

He licked his lips. "Maybe he got pushed too far. All his life somebody always pushed him. Somebody was always there to tell him what to do and what not to do. He got pushed once too often."

The kid stared ahead. "He exploded. A guy can take just so much. Then something's got to give."

I eased my foot on the accelerator.

He looked at me. "What are you slowing down for?"

"Low on gas," I said. "The station ahead is the first I've seen in the last forty miles. It might be another forty before I see another."

I turned off the road and pulled to a stop next to the three pumps. An elderly man came around to the driver's side of the car.

"Fill the tank," I said. "And check the oil."

The kid studied the gas station. It was a small building, the only structure in the ocean of wheat fields. The windows were grimy with dust.

I could just make out a wall phone inside.

The kid jiggled one foot. "That old man takes a long time. I don't like waiting." He watched him lift the hood to check the oil. "Why does anybody that old want to live? He'd be better off dead."

I lit a cigarette. "He wouldn't agree with you."

The kid's eyes went back to the filling station. He grinned. "There's a phone in there. You want to call anybody?"

I exhaled a puff of cigarette smoke. "No."

When the old man came back with my change, the kid leaned toward the window. "You got a radio, mister?"

The old man shook his head. "No. I like things quiet."

The kid grinned. "You got the right idea, mister. When things are quiet you live longer."

Out on the road, I brought the speed back up to eighty.

The kid was quiet for a while, and then he said, "It took guts to kill seven people. Did you ever hold a gun in your hand?"

"I guess almost everybody has."

His teeth showed through twitching lips. "Did you ever point it at anybody?"

I glanced at him.

His eyes were bright. "It's good to have people afraid of you," he said. "You're not short any more when you got a gun."

"No," I said. "You're not a runt any more."

He flushed slightly.

"You're the tallest man in the world," I said. "As long as nobody else has a gun too."

"It takes a lot of guts to kill," the kid said again. "Most people don't know that."

"One of those killed was a boy of five," I said. "You got anything to say about that?"

He licked his lips.

"It could have been an accident."

I shook my head. "Nobody's going to think that."

His eyes seemed uncertain for a moment. "Why do you think he'd kill a kid?"

I shrugged. "That would be hard to say. He killed one person and then another and then another. Maybe after awhile it didn't make any difference to him what they were. Men, women, or children. They were all the same."

The kid nodded. "You can develop a taste for killing. It's not too hard. After the first few, it doesn't matter. You get to like it."

He was silent for another five minutes. "They'll never get him. He's too smart for that."

I took my eyes off the road for a few moments. "How do you figure that? The whole country's looking for him. Everybody knows what he looks like."

The kid lifted both his thin shoulders. "Maybe he doesn't care. He did what he had to do. People will know he's a big man now."

We covered a mile without a word and then he shifted in his seat. "You heard his description over the radio?"

"Sure," I said. "For the last week."

He looked at me curiously. "And you weren't afraid to pick me up?"

"No."

His smile was still sly. "You got nerves of steel?"

I shook my head. "No. I can be scared when I have to, all right."

He kept his eyes on me. "I fit the description perfectly."

"That's right."

The road stretched ahead of us and on both sides there was nothing but the flat plain. Not a house. Not a tree.

The kid giggled. "I look just like the killer. Everybody's scared of me. I like that."

"I hope you had fun," I said.

"I been picked up by the cops three times on this road in the last two days. I get as much publicity as the killer."

"I know," I said. "And I think you'll get more. I thought I'd find you somewhere on this highway."

I slowed down the car. "How about me? Don't I fit the description too?"

The kid almost sneered. "No. You got brown hair. His is red. Like mine."

I smiled. "But I could have dyed it."

The kid's eyes got wide when he knew what was going to happen.

He was going to be number eight.



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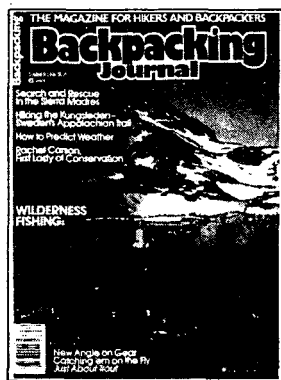
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All the Needless Killing

by Bryce Walton

He sat eating his regular morning orange and watching the narrow road below through spots of hemlock and pine. Gray and brown stone jutted out in split sections around him, and rose into a jumble of glacial rock blotched with red lichen.

He seemed to doze, but he was alert, listening, hearing everything—particularly the multiple teeming and droning of insect hordes in damp rock and leafy mould, and the flitting of gentle birds in the leaves. There were almost no visitors to this sequestered section at the north end of the lake any more. He would have heard unwanted intruders, but there were none. He heard her station wagon drive in, though, a little after ten, the regular time.

It turned in through the second-growth timber, headed toward the denser wooded area. He stood up, wiped his prim mouth with a clean blue bandanna, brushed dust from his corduroy trousers. Then, holding the handkerchief by opposite corners, he twirled it until it formed a taut effective tool for causing death by strangulation.

There was about him the manner of a mild man. The expression on his thin pale face was bland and his movements usually restrained and paced. But now as he started down through the rocks, he moved with a peculiar surefootedness, in quick, explosive and eager little leaps, suggesting those of a mountain goat.

She got out of the station wagon and stretched, a not unattractive woman whose slight chubbiness made her seem younger than she was, and helped to smooth out what would otherwise have been a few hard lines around her eyes and mouth. She wore slacks, not too tight, hiking boots; a loose khaki blouse with rolled-up sleeves. She had her

peroxidized hair tied in a pony tail with a red ribbon.

Sunlight through the leaves speckled her with shade. She took a deep breath. It had rained during the night. This morning was cooler than the others had been. Quaint animal life chattered and ran about. Snowdrops were open and forsythia broke in sprays of yellow. All ecstatic stuff for outdoor types, no doubt. But she did not consider herself an outdoor-type girl. Still it was a pleasant moment. And because it was pleasant, it reminded her of the city. She hoped soon to go back to Manhattan. One way or another.

She got the leather bag from the front seat, slid the strap over her shoulder. She opened the back of the station wagon, took out a cigar box lined with cotton, the killing-bottle, and two sandwiches and a thermos of martinis, put them into the bag. Then she got the butterfly net out and swished it delicately in the air.

This might, or might not, be another long unrewarding day. But it would alleviate the nauseating monotony of being the wife of a farmer. Especially a New England farmer, who happened to be wealthy. New England farmers were stereotypes of something; she wasn't quite sure what, except that it was tight-lipped, rigid, narrow and terribly grim. Anything, in a word, but pagan. Still, there were times when a girl, who had not always been blessed with security and leisure, should not complain.

She studied the ripe buzzing air and camp shadows with predatory eyes. A bright yellow butterfly flitted past on a vagrant breath of breeze and she skipped after it, swinging her butterfly net about in what appeared to be that specialized joy reserved only for hunters stalking prey.

At one P.M., she lay down by an aged elm, ate sandwiches, sipped a martini, then stretched out pleasantly tired, and with her forearm over her face, she closed her eyes.

It was the killing-bottle . . .

He watched her through a curtain of briar. His slightly enlarged eyes studied her through thick lenses like those of a microscope. After having watched her loathsome antics for three days, he knew that she possessed exceptional strength and agility for a woman. Overpowering her was out of the question, for he was a rather frail man and detested the physical. If she frightened easily, she would hardly keep coming daily

into these so-called ghoulish woods (the local natives were extremely superstitious) to hunt alone, therefore the paralyzed fear reaction could not be depended upon. The surprise attack seemed the only suitable approach.

He watched her until he felt sure she was sleeping soundly. He padded noiselessly in a circle, crept up behind the elm and peered around and down at the reclining figure.

He ran the slightly oily and damp rope of bandanna through his pink hands. He studied the movement, the sound of her breathing. She would hardly be awake before he slipped the handkerchief under her head and brought the ends together and twisted gently. Not too much pressure, of course, slow gentle application reducing consciousness, but not obliterating it. She would lie breathing as though asleep.

He looked at the killing-bottle beside her. It was about the size of an ordinary fruit-jar, perhaps bigger. There was the horrible column of cotton-wool coiling up to the glass stopper. There it was, her lethal chamber, her big-game hunting apparatus.

A slight smile, not so bland upon closer examination, appeared on his lips. There was a hint of cruelty in it. If it was cruelty, it was no ordinary kind, but the reserved, implacable judging and sentencing of a breaker of sacred laws by a creature of righteous wrath.

He slipped on a pair of tight brown suede gloves. She would lie there afterward, still breathing. He would release the stopper and the huntress would snuff up the almond-scented fumes. She wouldn't wake up, wouldn't mind at all because it was a safe and pleasant smell. It was always so difficult to understand why cyanide of potassium should be lethal. But it always was. And one long whiff of it would be all that was required.

He slipped around the tree, over protruding roots. He crouched. The handkerchief stretched taut between his hands. Slip it quickly beneath her head, twist, hold—

The bandanna ducked, slid—scooped empty air!

He fell to his knees off balance, and felt an amazingly light touch along his right arm, a digging under his shoulder. Then the world gyrated. It was a blur. It smeared in a senseless pinwheeling rush of mingled leaves, sky and whirling rocks.

He hit on his upper back with an unpleasant jarring thud. She was leaning against the tree watching him as he sat up and blinked. He felt

his neck. He rolled his head around a few times carefully, experimentally. His look, when he saw her, showed fear, but more outraged dignity mixed with sadness. He tensed as though to run away as he stood up.

"I'm sorry," she said, smiling in a warm but guarded manner. "But you scared me. I hope you're not hurt."

"I'm not sure," he mumbled and spat a fragment of leaf from his lip. He twisted, trying to determine if he was hurt. "I don't believe so."

They stared at one another for awhile.

"Sure you're not hurt?" she asked.

He managed a nervous smile and began brushing leaves from shirt and trousers. "I suppose not."

Her smile broadened. It was the friendly expression of a thoroughly confident person. "First time I ever had to really use the old judo. You'd be surprised how many girls are taking it up these days."

"Yes, it was a surprise."

"Well, I'm glad there was no harm done."

His watery distorted eyes blinked at her, then around at brush, trees, and rocks, back to her. He reached down, picked up his horn-rimmed glasses, and put them on. "Of course I should apologize and I do," he said, more at ease now. "Your actions were perfectly understandable. I should explain mine. You see, I was supposed to meet an—ah—friend here. Hardly anyone ever comes in here, so naturally I thought you were she."

She proffered a pack of cigarettes. He gracefully declined; he didn't use them.

She lit one for herself, and continued to study him with a friendly curiosity. Smoke formed two horns rising from her nostrils.

"Well," he finally said. "Again, I'm sorry. But I'd better move along. I don't want to miss my friend."

"Wait," she said. "Would you like a martini?" she lifted the thermos.

He moistened his lips. He shifted uneasily. "I really shouldn't."

"Please do; you could use it right now." She watched his face as she added, "You see, I know who you intended to meet here. *Me*."

He tensed again. His eyes widened, bulged slightly. "What?"

"I wish you wouldn't be afraid," she said.

"Why—why should I be?"

"That's right, you shouldn't." She poured a martini into the thermos

top and handed it to him.

He took it in a dazed, reflexive gesture and gulped it hastily. His high pale forehead was damp.

"More?"

"I—"

She poured the topful of martini. He sat down heavily on a rock and gripped the drink between both hands.

"I haven't lived in Sawmill County long," she said in a casual, conversational manner. "I'm Barbara. What's your name?"

"Jim," he said in an almost inaudible voice.

"Well, Jim, I came out here to live with my husband right after we were married a few months ago. That's the custom, you know." She smiled. He flashed a quick dutiful smile in return. Obviously, smiling was hardly one of his regular habits. "I was curious. I've always been curious. I learned a lot in a short time. One of the first things I heard about was Loon Woods. About how several people died around here during the past two summers."

Jim sipped his martini and sat rigidly on the edge of the rock.

"Four people. Two last summer, two the summer before. Three women, one man. I love mysteries and I found out more."

She lit a cigarette.

"Yes," he said faintly. "What did you find out?"

"They were of different ages, from various parts of the county. One, a woman, was from another state. The four who died weren't related. They didn't have a thing in common, Jim, but what they happened to be doing when they died. They were catching butterflies—with one exception, which isn't really an exception the way I see it. One of them, the man, was catching beetles."

"If you were that curious, you must have found out more."

"Oh, yes. But I guessed at things too. The two ladies who died summer before last were found poisoned, poisoned by the fumes from their killing-bottles. The man catching beetles last summer was poisoned by the bite of a water moccasin. The woman that summer was also poisoned by fumes from her killing-bottle. She fell, the bottle broke a few inches from her face; she inhaled the fumes."

"Something of a coincidence," Jim said.

"It certainly was, wasn't it? The three women all dying in the same way. Our local Sheriff Reed thought it was simply a coincidence. But

then he seems to be a very stupid and complaisant fellow. Not much imagination. The two women summer before last—it was easy to see them as accidents. The two last summer raised doubts in some people's minds, but not Sheriff Reed's."

"And what about you?" Jim asked. He had finished his second martini. His face was slightly flushed. He started to protest, but mildly, as she poured him a third. "Thank you, thank you very much," he said. "I seem to need these."

She was watching a number of gaudy butterflies fluttering about in the dappled shade. Her face softened. "Dear, beautiful, harmless things," she whispered. "There's so many of them around here now. People have been scared off from coming in here much, haven't they? Now it's as if those dear gentle things know where they're safe and protected from capture and cruel execution."

He started. He leaned toward her. His face softened, and his watery eyes seemed brimming with ineffable sadness. "Yes, they realize they have a refuge here. Many birds do too. This has become a kind of sanctuary."

She nodded and for awhile they shared an unspoken affinity, with the heat of the day flickering visibly upward from the loam and leaves.

"So," she said finally. "What about me, you ask? I'll tell you. I kept thinking about what those people had in common—their murdering of God's innocent. And, because I felt so strongly their evil—I got a hunch, Jim. I got a hunch about how and why they had really died."

Jim sipped his martini and his face was wistful and at the same time tense with interest. "Yes, I understand, you know. I, too, see those people as murderers."

"Of course. A few people realize the sacredness of life, of all life, from the smallest nit to the glorious elephant. Isn't that what you mean?"

His mouth dropped open. He nodded as though partially stunned. "Oh, yes, yes," he sighed.

"And I thought about it and there was my hunch. There were facts too, Jim. The poetic justice of their deaths. I knew it wasn't a coincidence. And then I found out that someone had seen a stranger near here twice just after those deaths. A stranger. A stranger because everyone around here knows everyone else. And this stranger couldn't be described exactly. Could have been a number of people. But it wasn't

anyone from around here. I decided that those four people had been killed, Jim."

He couldn't quite pull his fixed gaze from her face. There seemed to be a kind of rapture in her expression as if her own words had placed her under an euphoric spell.

"You see," she said, with a look of rapture, "it was more than just a hunch. I understood the need to do what someone had done to those people. I began to feel closer to the—I'd rather not say killer, but executioner. I understood why he did it, the need for justice."

"You did?" Jim whispered.

"Oh, yes. Before I left the city I belonged to many societies and organizations. We did our best to stop the senseless slaughter of life—especially all the small gentle things that have never harmed anything or anybody. We can do so little, but the few of us who care should do what we can, shouldn't we?"

"Yes."

"Not just words. Words are no good, are they?"

"No."

"Blood calls for blood." She clenched her fists. "Oh, I hate cruelty more than anything in the world!"

He leaned forward. His eyes were brighter as the cloudiness left them. "So do I." Then he shrank back and he kept staring at the killing-bottle and the butterfly net. "But you've been capturing them too. They suffer so horribly there, shut up in the bottle. I've seen them, how they flutter and beat and break themselves against the glass walls. I've seen them clinging to that ghastly cottonwool. How they strain and gasp for a last breath of living air."

A look of horror, only hinted at before, now lay full and undisguised upon Jim's face. He slid away from her across the rock, still clutching the top of the thermos.

She shook her head slowly. Her smile was sad and compassionate. "You don't understand, Jim. I wanted to meet someone else who felt as I did. I wanted to meet you. That's why I've come out here almost every day for the last month. I guessed that you might come here once in awhile to guard your sanctuary. Now I've found you, and you've found me."

"You lie," he said softly. "You're lying. This is some kind of a trap, isn't it?"

"Please!" She seemed almost on the verge of crying. "You must believe the truth, Jim. I've often felt like doing what was done to those vile, vicious people. But I never had the courage. Someone did, somewhere, I knew. I wanted to know that person."

"No, no!" He sat rigidly balanced on the edge of the rock. He started to sip more of the martini, but stopped—as though it had suddenly become distasteful. "You're like the others. You didn't mind murdering those lovely things, just to find me, and trap me."

"There's no one else around. No one has ever followed me, Jim, you know that."

He didn't answer.

"And even if I was an expert at judo, would I come out here alone to trap someone most people would regard as a vicious murderer?"

"Vicious—that isn't true. They died painlessly. That's more than can be said for the countless helpless creatures they tortured and killed!"

"I know that, Jim. Believe me. I know you could never be cruel. I know that you're dedicated to fighting cruelty, and avenging the gentle small things of this world. I am too, Jim. Believe me, I am too. Please believe me. Look."

She opened the cigar box. She walked toward him slowly, and he sat trembling with some odd hypersensitivity. He glanced reluctantly into the box.

"I've only caught a few, Jim. And they're all cabbage butterflies, don't you see?"

He nodded slowly.

"There are some kinds of butterflies that are dangerous pests, Jim. You must admit it. Just as there are locusts that destroy. There are mosquitoes and other kinds of pests. Only man kills for pleasure, but there are harmful kinds among all species. Isn't that true?"

He hesitated, then gave a quick nod of assent. But he wouldn't look at the box any more. "Undeniably, you're right," he said. "Yes, you're right about the cabbage butterfly. And there are other noxious insects that should be destroyed, just as is the case with men."

"But there are not many insects that deserve such a fate, Jim. And you can see that I've caught only the harmful ones."

"Yes. The list of destructive lepidoptera is relatively insignificant." He seemed to relax a little. She refreshed his martini, and he began to sip again.

His face was soon flushed, and his breathing fast. She put her hand over his hand, and they sat there together side by side on the rock holding hands for some time, communing in an inner quiet that seemed flawless and unbreakable.

Then they finished the batch of martinis and talked in excited discovery of one another. He talked about the brief but glorious life of the butterflies and other insects, how they lived their own brilliant but strange cycle in only a few hours sometimes, to finally be killed by nature's way, by the frost. Everything had been planned to balance out, and man was destroying the balance, destroying the world itself.

She asked him again to trust her. She would be back again tomorrow, she said. He could meet her there in the same place. He could watch, be certain she was not followed, finally be convinced that she was not part of any sort of trap.

They met there the next day. She waited over an hour under the elm until suddenly he appeared, moving out of the leaves silently. She had two thermos bottles of martinis this time, and they enjoyed themselves with a steady lessening of strain and suspicion.

He talked about when summer would be over; the blossoms would come to seed and the fledglings to flight. The knowing squirrel was already hoarding its winter harvest. Soon feathered migrants would be heading south and the cricket would seek a sheltered place. The sun would cross the celestial equator, he said, and summer would be officially dismissed. But the squirrels, chipmunks and woodchucks and robins knew nothing of these precise hours or minutes. They did well enough, he said, without clocks or calendars. He felt it in his blood too, he said, just as they did. And just as she did, she was quick to point out. No need to check anything by manmade instruments of measurement to know. Indeed not, she said. They didn't have to look at the sun's shadow. How unimportant precise moments were, he said, except in man's statistics.

Cause and effect, nature's cosmic balance. Man was destroying it all.

"God, Jim," she said with an almost savage intensity, "if we could only do more to save millions of little lives."

They met the next day, the day after, and then almost every day. Soon he was waiting for her. It was a lonely world for their kind, they agreed. They sat until the sun went down and the cicada droning of

he hot afternoon began to fade and the insect chorus began.

She pointed out a dead robin, then another.

"You know what killed them?" she said. "What is killing birds by the thousands every day, Jim?"

He caressed the small inert puff of feathers, then turned away.

"Man is killing them, Jim. The farmers around here are killing everything with their pumps of poison sprays. You know that, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, I know that!"

"Every day, Jim, with their pumps and vile hoses smearing poison over the land. Millions—billions even—are being killed now. It poisons the larvae and pupae and they never are allowed to live. And that kills the birds too, because they eat the insects and the larvae. That's what kills these robins, you know."

"I know." He sank down to his knees and remained there for some time, his head bowed.

She whispered with a harshly accusing tone. "We're quibblers and noddlers, Jim. We are, you know. You made your gesture, didn't you, but how insignificant it was compared with what they do every day. They slaughter millions every day. And you've struck back, yes, but what have you and I accomplished? Four people! They didn't use sprays. They killed a few, but how does that compare with the billions that are being slaughtered here day in and day out?"

"I know, I know," he moaned softly. He raised small clenched fists. "What can I do? I used to try to convince others. I published pamphlets. I made speeches at the university, but they laughed at me finally. People think I'm abnormal in some way, a kind of—well—a crackpot. That's what they say about our kind. I can only do a little. Sometimes it seems to be driving me crazy because I'm alone and helpless and frustrated and no one cares!"

"Now you listen," she said and turned him around and they looked steadily into each other's face. "You can do a great deal more. With one act you can save millions and millions of sacred little lives."

As she continued talking and he listened, his eyes grew abnormally bright behind his thick-lensed glasses. He bent slightly forward and his breath came faster. He kept nodding in agreement, his head moving in quick jerking little motions like a bird's.

"I know their habits," she said. "I can help. I know when they work and where to find them. I'll tell you when and where to strike!"

"Not a few," he whispered. "But millions and billions saved. The birds saved!"

"Yes, yes!"

He began to sway in a subtle rhythm to the intensity of his feeling as she gave him vital information. The insect chorus rose around him. It was only a whispering of the wind and the rustling of leaves at first. Then it swelled from the throats of the most abundant life on earth: the pygmy hordes celebrating their season in the sun, the late afternoon of their life.

The insect chorus rose in his ears like thunder, the humming, scratching, singing drone swelled and seemed to explode in his head . . .

He was there in the storage shed, under the damp corrugated tin roof, early. He was there alert and ready before five A.M. Above him on a rack of two-by-four planks were the barrels of deadly parathion used to spray crops, used to heartlessly slaughter millions of sacred living things. A few pests must be killed, therefore go on and kill everything: kill all the beautiful gentle things, kill the butterflies and velvet-winged moths, kill the beautiful Swallowtail and the Macaons and Purple Emperors and lovely iridescent peacock-winged Pavitos, kill the Holly Blues, and the Tornoasoladas and magnificent golden-wing Tortoise shells. And finally there would be nothing, nothing but silence where the robins had once come back in the spring.

He stood in the shadows waiting, with the spray tank beside him and the nozzle ready in his hand. A tinge of dawn filtered through the cracks in the shed and he heard the plaintive screech of a barn owl and then the back screen door of the farmhouse snapped shut.

He waited and listened to the clopping of heavy shoes approaching the door of the shed.

It did not matter who it was, of course. He was one of the killers: and soon he would die so that millions might live. Blood calls for blood. The workings of justice are indeed secret and incalculable. This one now, and the others later, one by one. He remembered what she had told him and she was so right about it, about so many things. There was enough poison in one small killing-bottle to kill the inhabitants of an entire town. But how to administer it? How much more logical it was to select those who were directly responsible for the in-

discriminate murder of millions, eliminate them on the spot. Painlessly of course, or comparatively painlessly, and with poetic justice, as she had pointed out, with their own vile, suffocating, poisonous spray!

He peered through a crack between the warped boards. He saw a shadowy figure only a few yards from the shed now, a tall man in a straw hat with a ragged brim, a pair of levis, a faded blue denim jacket.

Jim inhaled deeply and raised the handle of the spray pump. That man was not at all a hated object. He could be regarded objectively, without malice, merely as a thing to be eliminated for purposes that no sane man should reasonably question.

The man stepped through the doorway. He stopped, startled, uncertain. Jim pushed down the pump handle and a pale stream caught the man flush and hissing in the face. The man screamed and clawed at his eyes. He ran blindly into the side of the shed and fell as Jim coolly continued to pump while aiming the nozzle with unerring accuracy and singleness of purpose.

Barbara sat pale and tearless at the kitchen table, as if too shocked, too stunned, to cry. Sheriff Reed watched her with awkward sympathy, his small black eyes in a porcine face avoiding her direct gaze. He finished the coffee in one sucking gulp and stood up.

"Better get that fella into the town jail," he said. "Guess I better."

"More coffee?" she asked listlessly.

"No, thank you, Ma'am. I got here quick as I could when you telephoned. But I guess I couldn't have helped much nohow."

"No one could have done anything," she said. "A few drops of parathion on the skin can kill a person in minutes if they don't get treatment. My—my husband was just drowned in it by that—that awful person!"

"Well, we got him, Ma'am, thanks to you. Pretty good shootin', only it's kind of a good thing you didn't hit him in a vital spot. That would have been too easy on him."

"Darrell thought it was a robber and went out to see," she said. "That was all—"

"I reckon he was at least a thief. He don't look like no thief though. Identification says he's a college professor from over in Lakeville."

"He—he must have been crazy or something," she said thinly.

"Can't ever tell about people."

"I don't care. I've lost my Darrell!" She turned away and bit her lip.

"Fine man," Sheriff Reed said. "Hard worker and steady as a rock. Never harmed nobody. Well—" he hesitated. "—he was a good provider and I reckon he left you comfortable set up—I mean money-wise?"

She nodded. The farm plus fifty thousand in insurance was indeed comforting. She would sell the farm, rent a penthouse on Park Avenue. No more scrounging for television roles or being a stand-in for much less talented actresses than herself. If she still felt so inclined, she would buy a lead in a Broadway show, and—

She put her head down on her folded arms and began to cry.

Sheriff Reed patted her shoulder. "You just let it all out now, Ma'am, that's what you need. I'll take that fellow on in. Why, the poor guy's liable to bleed plumb to death. And you're right, I think he's buggy. He won't say anything. Every time you pick him up he falls down on his hands and knees again."

She seemed too broken up to answer. He backed quietly out the kitchen door.

There was some claim to his being insane.

But he was articulate and disclaimed any inability to distinguish right from wrong.

He knew very well right from wrong and passionately explained how right he had been in killing people . . .

They strapped down his wrists to the arms of the chair. His ankles were clamped. Steel doors slammed. He stared at the glass enclosure of the chamber. Faces studied him curiously through the glass, and the faces began to blur as if the glass were steaming over.

He hadn't realized for some time what was really happening to him. It was as though he had been sleep-walking and had suddenly awakened.

And now he knew.

He knew when the cyanide pellets dropped into a bucket of acid under his chair and the fumes drifted up into a mist before his face.

He smelled the fumes and he saw the faces pressing against the glass and watching him through the glass and he knew well enough.

It was the killing-bottle.

The Explosives Expert

by John Lutz

Billy Edgemore, the afternoon bartender, stood behind the long bar of the Last Stop Lounge and squinted through the dimness at the sunlight beyond the front window. He was a wiry man, taller than he appeared at first, and he looked like he should be a bartender, with his bald head, cheerfully seamed face and his brilliant red vest that was the bartender's uniform at the Last Stop. Behind him long rows of glistening bottles picked up the light on the mirrored backbar, the glinting clear gins and vodkas, the beautiful amber bourbons and lighter Scotches, the various hues of the assorted wines, brandies and liqueurs. The Last Stop's bar was well stocked.

Beyond the ferns that blocked the view out (and in) the front window, Billy saw a figure cross the small patch of light and turn to enter the stained-glass front door, the first customer he was to serve that day.

It was Sam Daniels. Sam was an employee of the Hulton Plant up the street, as were most of the customers of the Last Stop.

"Afternoon, Sam," Billy said, turning on his professional smile. "Kind of early today, aren't you?"

"Off work," Sam said, mounting a bar stool as if it were a horse. "Beer."

Billy drew a beer and set the wet schooner in front of Sam on the mahogany bar. "Didn't expect a customer for another two hours, when the plant lets out," Billy said.

"Guess not," Sam said, sipping his beer. He was a short man with a swarthy face, a head of curly hair, and a stomach paunch too big for a man in his early thirties—a man who liked his drinking.

"Figured you didn't go to work when I saw you weren't wearing

your badge," Billy said. The Hulton Plant manufactured some secret government thing, a component for the hydrogen bomb, and each employee had to wear his small plastic badge with his name, number and photograph on it in order to enter or leave the plant.

"Regular Sherlock," Sam said, and juggled the beer in his glass.

"You notice lots of things when you're a bartender," Billy said, wiping down the bar with a clean white towel. You notice things, Billy repeated to himself, and you get to know people, and when you get to know them, really get to know them, you've got to dislike them. "I guess I tended bar in the wrong places."

"What's that?" Sam Daniels asked.

"Just thinking out loud," Billy said, and hung the towel on its chrome rack. When Billy looked at his past he seemed to be peering down a long tunnel of empty bottles, drunks and hollow laughter; of curt orders, see-through stares and dreary conversations. He'd never liked his job, but it was all he'd known for the past thirty years.

"Wife's supposed to meet me here pretty soon," Sam said. "She's getting off work early." He winked at Billy. "Toothache."

Billy smiled his automatic smile and nodded. He never had liked Sam, who had a tendency to get loud and violent when he got drunk.

Within a few minutes Rita Daniels entered. She was a tall, pretty woman, somewhat younger than her husband. She had a good figure, dark eyes, and expensively bleached blonde hair that looked a bit stringy now from the heat outside.

"Coke and bourbon," she ordered, without looking at Billy. He served her the highball where she sat next to her husband at the bar.

No one spoke for a while as Rita sipped her drink. The faint sound of traffic, muffled through the thick door of the Last Stop, filled the silence. When a muted horn sounded, Rita said, "It's dead in here. Put a quarter in the jukebox."

Sam did as his wife said, and soft jazz immediately displaced the traffic sounds.

"You know I don't like jazz, Sam." Rita downed her drink quicker than she should have, then got down off the stool to go to the powder room.

"Saw Doug Baker last night," Billy said, picking up the empty glass. Doug Baker was a restaurant owner who lived on the other side of town, and it was no secret that he came to the Last Stop only to see

Rita Daniels, though Rita was almost always with her husband.

"How 'bout that," Sam said. "Two more of the same."

Rita returned to her stool, and Billy put two highballs before her and her husband.

"I was drinking beer," Sam said in a loud voice.

"So you were," Billy answered, smiling his My Mistake smile. He shrugged and motioned toward the highballs. "On the house. Unless you'd rather have beer."

"No," Sam said, "think nothing of it."

That was how Billy thought Sam would answer. His cheapness was one of the things Billy disliked most about the man. It was one of the things he knew Rita disliked most in Sam Daniels too.

"How'd it go with the hydrogen bombs today?" Rita asked her husband. "Didn't go in at all, huh?"

Billy could see she was aggravated and was trying to nag him.

"No," Sam said, "and I don't make hydrogen bombs."

"Ha!" Rita laughed. "You oughta think about it. That's about all you can make." She turned away before Sam could answer. "Hey, Billy, you know anything about hydrogen bombs?"

"Naw," Billy said. "Your husband knows more about that than me."

"Yeah," Rita said, "the union rates him an expert. Some expert! Splices a few wires together."

"Five dollars an hour," Sam said, "and double time for overtime."

Rita whirled a braceleted arm above her head. "Wheee . . ."

Like many married couples, Sam and Rita never failed to bicker when they came into the Last Stop. Billy laughed. "The Friendly Daniels." Sam didn't laugh.

"Don't bug me today," Sam said to Rita. "I'm in a bad mood."

"Cheer up, Sam," Billy said. "It's a sign she loves you, or loves somebody, anyway."

Sam ignored Billy and finished his drink. "Where'd you go last night?" he asked his wife.

"You know I was at my sister's. I even stopped in here for about a half hour on the way. Billy can verify it."

"Right," Billy said.

"I thought you said Doug Baker was in here last night," Sam said to him, his eyes narrow.

"He was," Billy said. "He, uh, came in late." He turned to make

more drinks, placing the glasses lip to lip and pouring bourbon into each in one deft stream without spilling a drop. He made them a little stronger this time, shooting in the soda expertly, jabbing swizzle sticks between the ice cubes and placing the glasses on the bar.

"You wouldn't be covering up or anything, would you, Billy?" Sam's voice had acquired a mean edge.

"Now *wait a minute!*" Rita said. "If you think I came in here last night to see Doug Baker, you're crazy!"

"Well," Sam stirred his drink viciously and took a sip, "Billy mentioned Baker was in here . . ."

"I said he came in late," Billy said quickly.

"And he acted like he was covering up or something," Sam said, looking accusingly at Billy.

"*Covering up?*" Rita turned to Billy, her penciled eyebrows knitted in a frown. "Have you ever seen me with another man?"

"Naw," Billy said blandly, "of course not. You folks shouldn't fight."

Still indignant, Rita swiveled on her stool to face her husband. "Have I ever been unfaithful?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Good point," Billy said with a forced laugh.

"It's not funny!" Rita snapped.

"Keep it light, folks," Billy said seriously. "You know we don't like trouble in here."

"Sorry," Rita said, but her voice was hurt. She swiveled back to face the bar and gulped angrily on her drink. Billy could see that the liquor was getting to her, was getting to them both.

There was silence for a while, then Rita said morosely "I *oughta* go out on you, Mr. Five-dollar-hydrogen-bomb-expert! You think I do anyway, and at least Doug Baker's got money."

Sam grabbed her wrist, making the bracelets jingle. She tried to jerk away but he held her arm so tightly that his knuckles were white. "You ever see Baker behind my back and I'll kill you both!" He almost spit the words out.

"Hey, now," Billy said gently, "don't talk like that, folks!" He placed his hand on Sam Daniels' arm and felt the muscles relax as Sam released his wife. She bent over silently on her stool and held the wrist as if it were broken. "Have one on the house," Billy said, taking up their almost empty glasses. "One to make up by."

"Make mine straight," Sam said. He was breathing hard and his face was red.

"*Damn you!*" Rita moaned. She half fell off the stool and walked quickly but staggeringly to the powder room again.

Billy began to mix the drinks deftly, speedily, as if there were a dozen people at the bar and they all demanded service. In the faint red glow from the beer-ad electric clock he looked like an ancient alchemist before his rows of multicolored bottles. "You shouldn't be so hard on her," he said absently as he mixed. "Can't believe all the rumors you hear about a woman as pretty as Rita, and a harmless kiss in fun never hurt nobody."

"Rumors?" Sam leaned over the bar. "Kiss? What kiss? Did she kiss Baker last night?"

"Take it easy," Billy said. "I told you Baker came in late." The phone rang, as it always did during the fifteen minutes before the Hulton Plant let out, with wives leaving messages and asking for errant husbands. When Billy returned, Rita was back at the bar.

"Let's get out of here," she said. There were tear streaks in her makeup.

"Finish your drinks and go home happy, folks." Billy shot a glance at the door and set the glasses on the bar.

Rita drank hers slowly, but Sam tossed his drink down and stared straight ahead. Quietly, Billy put another full glass in front of him.

"I hear you *were* in here with Baker last night," Sam said in a low voice. "Somebody even saw you kissing him."

"You're *crazy!*" Rita's thickened voice was outraged.

Billy moved quickly toward them. "I didn't say that."

"I knew you were covering up!" Sam glared pure hate at him. "We'll see what Baker says, because I'm going to drive over to his place right now and bash his brains out!"

"*But I didn't even see Baker last night!*" Rita took a pull on her drink, trying to calm herself. Sam swung sharply around with his forearm, hitting Rita's chin and the highball glass at the same time. There was a clink as the glass hit her teeth and she fell backward off the stool.

Billy reached under the bar and his hand came up with a glinting chrome automatic that seemed to catch every ray of light in the place. It was a gentleman's gun, and standing there in his white shirt and red

vest Billy looked like a gentlemen holding it.

"Now, don't move, folks." He aimed the gun directly at Sam's stomach. "You know we don't go for that kind of trouble in here." He looked down and saw blood seeping between Rita's fingers as she held her hand over her mouth. Billy wet a clean towel and tossed it to her, and she held it to her face and scooted backward to sit sobbing in the farthest booth.

Billy leaned close to Sam. "Listen," he said, his voice a sincere whisper, "I don't want to bring trouble on Baker, or on you for that matter, so I can't stand by and let you go over there and kill him and throw your own life away. It wasn't him she was in here with. He came in later."

"Wasn't him?" Sam asked in bewildered fury. "Who was it then?"

"I don't know," Billy said, still in a whisper so Rita couldn't hear. "He had a badge on, so he worked at the plant, but I don't know who he is and that's the truth."

"Oh, no!"

"Take it easy, Sam. She only kissed him in that booth there. And I'm not even sure I saw that. The booth was dark."

Sam tossed down the drink that was on the bar and moaned. He was staring at the automatic and Billy could see he wanted desperately to move.

A warm silence filled the bar, and then the phone rang shrilly, turning the silence to icicles.

"Now take it easy," Billy said, backing slowly down the bar toward the phone hung on the wall. "A kiss isn't anything." As the phone rang again he could almost see the shrill sound grate through Sam's tense body. Billy placed the automatic on the bar and took the last five steps to the phone. He let it ring once more before answering it.

"Naw," Billy said into the receiver, standing with his back to Sam and Rita, "he's not here." He stood for a long moment instead of hanging up, as if someone were still on the other end of the line.

The shot was a sudden, angry bark.

Billy put the receiver on the hook and turned. Sam was standing slumped with a supporting hand on a bar stool. Rita was crumpled on the floor beneath the table of the booth she'd been sitting in, her eyes open, her blonde hair bright with blood.

His head still bowed, Sam began to shake.

Within minutes the police were there, led by a young plainclothes detective named Parks.

"You say they were arguing and he just up and shot her?" Parks was asking as his men led Sam outside.

"He accused her of running around," Billy said. "They were arguing, he hit her, and I was going to throw them out when the phone rang. I set the gun down for a moment when I went to answer the phone, and he grabbed it and shot."

"Uh-hm," Parks said efficiently, flashing a look toward where Rita's body had lain before they'd photographed it and taken it away. "Pretty simple, I guess. Daniels confessed as soon as we got here. In fact, we couldn't shut him up. Pretty broken."

"Who wouldn't be?" Billy said.

"Save some sympathy for the girl." Parks looked around. "Seems like a nice place. I don't know why there's so much trouble in here."

Billy shrugged. "In a dive, a class joint or a place like this, people are mostly the same."

Parks grinned. "You're probably right," he said, and started toward the door. Before pushing it open, he paused and turned. "If you see anything like this developing again, give us a call, huh?"

"Sure," Billy said, polishing a glass and holding it up to the fading afternoon light. "You know we don't like trouble in here."



The 79 Murders of Martha Hill Gibbs

by Joseph Csida

In the thirty-nine years I served on the Police Force, from foot patrolman through Commissioner, until I retired in 1955 at the age of sixty-five, I would estimate that I was directly or indirectly involved with slightly over 4000 matricides, uxoricides, filicides, fratricides, parricides and homicides of every conceivable description. Right after I was promoted to Detective Second Grade, while still quite a young man, I was personally responsible for solving a very complex case in which a psychotic chemist killed his wife by injecting bubonic plague germs into her vein, and I have sat in a hundred times on the breaking of the more common dull-witted felon who beats his innocent and generally weaker victim to death with his fists or whatever other blunt instrument he finds at hand.

In all those years, apart from official reports, I have never written a single word about any of these homicides. Now at seventy-one when writing comes quite hard to me, both because it is difficult for me to concentrate as I did when my brain was more nimble, and because the arthritic condition afflicting my hands makes it painful to hold this pencil tightly for more than a half hour or so at a time . . . now I find I *must* write the complete story of these recent deaths.

You note I do not call them homicides. I do not because I do not know whether or not they were homicides.

And if they were homicides I do not know whether the homicides were perpetrated by human hand or by some supernatural force.

It is to attempt to clarify these haunting questions in my own mind that I write this story at all. I have not slept a full night for three weeks, and I am not sure I ever will again until I feel I have exhausted every effort to determine what crimes were committed and by whom.

Until Martha Hill Gibbs herself died last week, I could not have brought myself to write this essay at all. Martha Hill Gibbs was one of my oldest and dearest friends, and as fine a woman as I have ever known. If you read detective and mystery stories at all you yourself must surely feel as though you, too, know Martha Hill Gibbs.

She was often called the American Agatha Christie. She wrote her first detective novel, featuring Nurse Mary Brown, in 1921. That year she just wrote the one novel, since she was doing a full-time job as a reporter on *The News* to pay her husband's way through medical school. But every year from that point on, right up until this year, she wrote two complete detective novels each and every year, not to mention countless short stories. You were probably a Nurse Brown fan, just as many people today are Perry Mason fans. Or more likely you are a Chuck Silk, Hollywood actor-private detective fan, since Martha stopped writing the Nurse Brown stories about 1946, and has concentrated almost entirely on Chuck Silk since then.

(But I ramble. You must forgive this terrible weakness of an old man, this tendency to ramble. I will try not to do it.)

As I said, I could never have brought myself to write this story while Martha was alive, no matter what the urgency. And now that I have embarked on the task, I find I hardly know where to begin. Perhaps that morning about six months ago, when Martha phoned to tell me that her husband, and my life-long good friend, Dr. Edward Gibbs had died, is the best place to begin. As I think back on it, it does seem to me that it was shortly after Ed's death that Martha began to act peculiarly.

It was 6:02 that morning when my phone rang. I put down my toothbrush, rinsed my mouth, went into the bedroom and picked up the phone.

"Frank?" Martha said, "Frank, Ed's dead. Please come over." There was no hysteria in her deep, resonant voice, just sadness and weariness.

I live diagonally across The Hemlocks from the Gibbs', so it didn't take me more than five minutes to get over. The front door was open, and I walked in, and went up to the bedroom.

Martha was sitting on the side of the bed, holding Ed's hand. Ed was lying on his back, a soft, pleasant smile on his lips, his eyes closed as though in most relaxed sleep.

"You haven't really gone away, Eddie, have you?" she was murmuring. "I don't want you to go away."

Then she saw me.

"Ed's dead," she said again, quietly, rising from the bed. Martha was a tall woman, about 5' 10". She was never really beautiful, but rather handsome and efficient. Ed's death seemed to have caused her to shrink in a strange way. "But he hasn't really gone away, has he, Frank?" she said now.

I consoled her as best I could. We called our mutual friend, Dr. Goldstein. Ed had died quietly in his sleep of a heart failure. Since he was seventy-five years old, and both he and Martha had had a coronary condition for a number of years, his death came as no real surprise to any of us. But surprise or no surprise, there is always a measure of shock, no matter what the deceased's age, and when people love each other as deeply and genuinely for almost forty years as did Ed and Martha Gibbs, there is also a fierce if quiet heartbreak.

Miss Schmidt, Martha's secretary, and I made all the arrangements for the services and the funeral. I myself broke the news to the Gibbs' granddaughter, Sue, who was away in her first year of college in Los Angeles. Sue is practically like my own granddaughter, just as my own son and daughter, now doing well in Tokyo and Ypsilanti, Michigan, respectively, grew up viewing Ed and Martha Hill Gibbs as a second father and mother.

It was right after the funeral that Martha again displayed the odd new attitude she was developing. Sue, who is seventeen, and Martha and I were in the kitchen of the Gibbs' house, quietly sitting at the table with coffee Sue had just made. Sue was still crying, dry and invisible but very real inner tears.

"Now," she said, "now . . . Gramp won't be able to come to my wedding."

"Of course he will, sweetheart," Martha said in her husky, almost baritone voice.

"What wedding?" I asked. "I didn't know you were going to get married, Sue. . . . Martha, you never mentioned it."

Martha looked at me in a most startled manner for a moment. Then she looked at Sue.

"Yes, Susie dear," she said. "What wedding? You never mentioned a wedding to me. . . . And of course Gramp will be there."

Sue reached across the table and took Martha's hand.

"I'm sorry, Gram," she said, and looking at me, "I'm sorry, Uncle Frank, it's terribly selfish of me. But Charlie Silk and I are planning to get married next month."

Martha again looked startled.

"Charlie Silk?" she said. "You can't mean Charlie Silk. He's my detective, and of course Gramp will be there."

That sounds even more peculiar than it is, or than I mean it to sound. Charlie Silk, as I mentioned earlier and as you know, is the detective character Martha created, just as Erle Stanley Gardner created Perry Mason, or Agatha Christie created Hercule Poirot or Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes.

As a matter of fact, the Charlie Silk TV series is doing almost as well as the Perry Mason series, they tell me. But there is also a real Charlie Silk. Somebody discovered him last fall when Martha and Ed went out to Hollywood to get the Charlie TV film series launched. This Charlie Silk was a private investigator who doubled as a bit-part actor and vice versa.

For a time it looked like he would actually play the Charlie Silk part in the series. But Martha told me later that he was too incompetent an actor, and she didn't like him generally.

The series' producer, however, did use the real Charlie Silk quite extensively in publicity in connection with the series at the time. And I think it was then that Silk met Sue Gibbs, since she had gone out with her grandparents to enroll in school out there.

This particular evening, following the funeral, Martha made some vague, sometimes gentle, sometimes aggressive objections to Sue's marrying Silk, but finally she dropped the subject. She also mentioned repeatedly that Gramp would not like the idea at all, but she finally told Sue not to worry, that Gramp would come to the wedding anyway. I was rather upset to see Martha so distraught and so obviously thrown off her balance by Ed's death. Over the next several weeks, even after Sue went back to school, the situation did not improve. If anything it became worse.

I visited Martha each day, and on each visit she would go on at great length about her conversations with Ed and their plans for the future. Once I walked into the house, and as I approached her study through the living room, I heard her saying:

"Mr. Grau, you are being utterly ridiculous. There is a very substantial difference between murdering someone for profit, and a State execution of that murderer. Murder is not merely murder no matter what the circumstances. I do not necessarily believe there is any such thing as justifiable homicide. . . ."

I walked into the study. Martha was sitting at her desk. She was speaking to the empty chair at the side of the desk.

I said, "Hello, Martha," and she turned slowly and smiled.

"Frank," she said, "how nice you could come. I was just talking with Mr. Grau."

I tried to hide my bafflement, but apparently didn't succeed, for she said:

"You know Mr. Grau, of course: He was the murderer in *Death on the Dixie Highway*. He killed that lovely young couple from Alabama."

You may remember *Death on the Dixie Highway*. I think it was one of the best Martha had ever done. Mr. Grau was a particularly cunning killer. As I remembered him, a kindly gentleman of about sixty with a surprisingly luxuriant head of white hair and handlebar mustache to match. But Mr. Grau was a character in a seven-year-old novel, not a real person sitting in Martha's study. At least I thought so then.

I joined the conversation with the invisible Mr. Grau and Martha long enough to humor her out of it, then discussed a new rose bush I had planted that morning. I also spent about an hour and a half trying to persuade Martha to begin a new book. I felt that if I could get her immersed in her writing again, an occupation which she truly loved, it would help her. At one point in this discussion she smiled sweetly at me and said:

"I have the most wonderful plot, Frank, but I don't believe I'll write this one."

And the next morning—it was a Sunday—Martha disappeared.

About seven-thirty that morning, I was out trimming the rose bush I had discussed with her when a very well kept and polished ebony limousine pulled up across the street directly in front of the Gibbs' house. I put down my shears and put on my glasses. The car looked like a 1927 model of the kind the more affluent gangsters of that era sported. And as I looked a thin, tall, swarthy man stepped out of the car on the driver's side and came around to the opposite side, the side

facing the Gibbs' house. He was, ridiculously enough, dressed in a loud, light-colored suit and white panama hat. He, like the automobile, looked like a tin horn but successful gangster or gambler of the late twenties.

I peered at him, and had the strange feeling that I knew him. Just then Martha came out of the door. She waved to me as she strode down the path. She seemed to walk more briskly and with more vitality than at any time since Ed's death.

"Good morning, Frank," she sang. I use that word advisedly, because that is virtually what she did, and this was the first time Martha had sounded of good cheer since Ed's passing. The tall man held the door open for her, she stepped into the car, he went around to the driver's side and they drove off. Martha waved again as they pulled away. I don't know why, but I noted the license number.

About four that afternoon Miss Schmidt called me.

"Mr. Malloy," she said, "did Mrs. Gibbs tell you she was going to be away today?"

"No," I said. "Why?"

"Well, she asked me to come in at my regular time today, about ten o'clock, and when I got here she was gone. I've been through the mail, and in addition to the normal correspondence and bills and solicitations, I found something very peculiar."

"What?"

"There's a note here . . . It says: 'We are having a very special reunion and would be greatly honored if you would join us. Johnny French will pick you up at 7:30 A.M., Sunday, August 11, if you care to attend our meeting.'

"And it's signed," said Miss Schmidt, "'Affectionately, Your Murderers.'"

A number of thoughts ran through my mind. I thought: Very interesting, she's plotting a new story. I thought: Johnny French, Johnny French, that's a very familiar name. I thought about the tall, thin swarthy man from 1927.

As I have said, Martha Hill Gibbs and Ed, and my deceased wife, Ann, and I were close friends ever since we were all in our twenties. I got to know Martha originally when she came to see me at police headquarters to ask whether I would help her with some technical information she needed for her first detective novel.

Miss Schmidt said, rather anxiously, "Mr. Malloy, Mr. Malloy, are you there . . . Mr. Malloy!"

I didn't realize that I hadn't said anything for a long, long moment. And then it flashed through my mind that Johnny French was the murderer in the very first detective novel Martha Hill Gibbs wrote. And that the description of Johnny French, as I remembered it, fitted perfectly the description of the tall, thin swarthy man who had come to call for Martha that morning.

"Don't get excited, Miss Schmidt," I said, "and leave everything just the way it is. I'll be right over."

The arthritic pain in my hand and wrist and lower right arm is so intense now that I shall have to stop writing for a moment, but it is just as well. I need a little time to think again. About the fact that first I had come upon Martha having a conversation with Mr. Grau, one of her murderers, invisible though he was. And now I had *seen* Martha drive off with another of her murderers, Johnny French. A quite visible and real person. Quite possibly, I am forced to admit, Johnny French!

When I hung up the phone after talking to Miss Schmidt I took a moment to look up *The Wheel Stops at Murder*, Martha's first detective novel, in my library. I was right. The murderer's name was Johnny French and he looked precisely like the man who had picked Martha up that morning. And in the novel he drove a very expensive ebony limousine.

"I'm so glad you're here," Miss Schmidt said, as I walked into the study. "Here's the note."

She handed me a rolled document. Unrolled it measured approximately four by six inches. It was like no paper I had ever seen or felt. It was like no parchment either. And yet it was not exactly cloth. At the risk of seeming hysterical, I can only describe its color as an eerie blue. I did not know then, and have never found out, just what kind of material it was. The message Miss Schmidt had read me was typed neatly in the center of the material. I say typed, although I do not know that for sure either. The letters looked as though they had been typewritten rather than printed or handwritten. They were of a strangely faint gray or silver color.

In carefully interrogating Miss Schmidt I ascertained that as far as Miss Schmidt had been able to discover the document had simply appeared on Martha's desk. That is to say that while all the other mail of the day had been in envelopes, stamped and postmarked, this document had merely been lying in the center of the desk. A very thorough search by Miss Schmidt through the waste baskets also revealed no container in which the rolled message might have come.

I told Miss Schmidt she could go home. I made up my mind that if Martha was not back by the following morning I would call in the police. She did not return by the following morning, and so, at my request, a young officer of about fifty, a Sergeant from the Missing Persons Bureau, met me at the Gibbs House.

Naturally I did not tell him anything about Martha's behavior. I merely told him in the most explicit detail about her departure, described the man who had picked her up, and gave him the license number and rolled message which Miss Schmidt had found on her desk. I asked the young man, Sergeant Otto Hunseker, to keep me informed as to whatever progress he made, and he promised he would. He was as good as his word. It wasn't a full twenty-four hours later that he called me.

"Commissioner," he said. "This is Sergeant Hunseker. We found the limousine in a parking lot out at Idlewild. The owner is a Herman Grau and we're looking for him now. And we've found witnesses who saw the tall thin man you described escort Mrs. Gibbs to the gate for a jet flight to Los Angeles. So far we haven't found the man himself, nor anyone who saw Mrs. Gibbs after she got off the plane in L.A. I'm sure she's all right, though, and as soon as we find out anything more I'll let you know."

I thanked the Sergeant. But I was still quite worried. At the time it seemed to me utterly ridiculous that a name, Herman Grau, the same as the murderer in Martha's story, should pop up again. I called Sue Gibbs in Los Angeles, on the pretext of wishing to know how she was coming along in her studies, and how her wedding plans were progressing. Since I called her fairly regularly this raised no suspicion on her part that anything might be amiss insofar as her grandmother was concerned. She asked how Martha was, and I told her she was just fine. But this, of course, made it plain that Martha had not gone to Los Angeles to visit Sue.

Sergeant Hunseker came by to see me the following morning about ten.

"We can't find this Mr. Grau," he said. "But we know he's a small man about sixty, with a heavy head of snow-white hair and a white handlebar mustache. He bought the car about a week ago from the old opera singer, Ferdinand Wilmot. Wilmot's hobby is collecting and refurbishing old automobiles. The old man gave Wilmot \$10,000 for the car. In cash."

As I have indicated, I have been involved with criminal oddities of every description for almost forty years and I'm not easily jarred or shocked. But I must say that Hunseker's announcement gave me a most uneasy feeling.

"In the meantime," said Hunseker, "we're having a rough time pinning down that wacky note. The lab boys have checked it out with every available piece of information they have on manufacturers of paper and all kinds of special fabrics, and they can't find anything like it. And they checked every typewriter in the Gibbs' house and every standard typewriter make, and can't find a machine on which this could have been written. Seems strange, doesn't it?"

I told him about Sue, and my call to her, and he agreed with me that neither his department nor the Los Angeles police should talk to Sue.

"There's no sense in alarming her," Hunseker said. "I'm sure Mrs. Gibbs will show up any minute."

On Friday, five days after Martha disappeared, I was preparing to go to bed. It was one minute of eleven, and as is my habit, I went into my den and turned the television set on to the eleven o'clock news.

"What kind of a day has it been?" asked the newscaster. He went on to answer his own question. He covered a new international crisis, a local election, and then he said, "And in Hollywood today, Charles Silk died. Silk, a private detective and sometime actor, had been seriously considered for the part of the fictional sleuth of the same name in the popular TV series, *The Adventures of Chuck Silk*. Silk crashed to his death in a fall from the terrace of his penthouse apartment on the Sunset Strip in the film capital sometime late this evening. . ."

As is the irritating custom with shows of this kind there were no further details. I put in a call to Sergeant Hunseker and got him, finally, just as he arrived home.

"Yes," he said, "we got word about an hour ago. I'm trying to get an okay to go on out to the Coast to see if there's any connection between Silk's death and Mrs. Gibbs' disappearance. I'll let you know if I find out anything."

As much as my professional career has taught me patience and inured me to what the average person considers unbearable suspense, I must say that the next two days dragged on interminably for me. Nothing of any consequence happened. Sergeant Hunseker got permission to go, and left for Los Angeles on Sunday morning.

Sunday night about ten P.M. I was up in my den idly passing the time with my stamp collection, when I happened to look out the window facing the Gibbs' house. I looked over toward the chimney, then back to the page of early Roman stamps again, then my head jerked up, and I stared at the chimney. Incredible as it seemed, on a hot mid-August evening, smoke was coming from the Gibbs' chimney.

With an excitement which would have been much more becoming in a younger man, I got up from my desk, and put a pair of trousers on over my pajamas. I was halfway down the flight of stairs when the phone rang. This inexcusable excitement mounted in me at such a ridiculous rate that I became more than a little irritated with myself. I tripped and fell down the last three steps, hastening to the phone. Fortunately, I did not damage any of my ancient bones.

"Hello," I said, irritably, to the mouthpiece of the telephone.

"Hello," said Martha Hill Gibbs' deep voice. "Hello, Frank? This is Martha. . ."

She sounded extremely weary, wearier than I have ever heard her before.

"Martha, where are you?" I asked.

"Here, right here. Home," she said.

"Home? You mean across the street? In your own house? Right now?"

"Yes, of course, Frank. I just got in a few minutes ago. I'm terribly, terribly tired but I must talk to you. Could you come over in about an hour? Just let me rest for an hour, and come over . . ."

"Of course, Martha," I said, "I'll come right now."

"No," she said with what seemed to me a sudden desperate note in her voice. "Please don't come now. Come in an hour."

"All right, Martha," I said, puzzled, "but there's smoke coming from your chimney. . . ."

"I know, Frank, I'm burning some old boxes and papers Mrs. Klein left in the kitchen."

"Oh, all right, I'll be over in an hour."

It was about ten minutes of twelve (I just couldn't wait the full hour) that I burst into the Gibbs' house. Martha was lying on the sofa in the living room. At first I thought she might be asleep. But as I hesitated at the door, she rose slowly and sat up.

"Come in, Frank, please," she said.

In the lamplight she looked more exhausted than I believe I have ever seen any human being look. But there was a brightness in her eyes that startled me. I know that this will sound inexcusably dramatic, but it was as though her whole being was burning with a fierce inner fire which showed only in her eyes. For the rest, her skin had a greyish pallor, and there were deep purple-black shadows beneath her eyes.

"Martha, Martha," I said, "where have you been? I. . . ."

She reached out her hand.

"Frank, it's so good to see you again. But please don't press me. Please sit down. Make yourself a drink, if you wish . . . but please, hurry and sit down. I have had the most frightening, the most fascinating, the most exhilarating experience of my life. I must tell someone. I. . . . please, Frank, sit down."

As I sat it occurred to me that the living room was filled with a strange odor. It passed through my mind fleetingly that the odor was similar to one I smelled often years ago, when a regular part of getting my hair cut was a singe, when the barber burned the edges of my freshly cut hair with the flame of a lighted taper. It was, quite plainly, I thought then, the smell of burning hair. I looked over toward the fireplace. The last embers of a small fire were dying there.

But Martha had my hand and was pulling me down beside her on the French provincial sofa.

"Frank," she said, "you must promise you'll never tell anyone this story as long as you live."

"Well, Martha"

"Please, Frank, you must promise"

I nodded vaguely, and sat down beside her.

"I just attended a reunion of all my murderers," she said.

"Oh, Martha, come on now, be sensible. . ."

"You remember last Sunday morning when I waved to you as I was leaving?" she said. "You know who that was? That man who picked me up?"

I looked into the wild flame of her eyes. I hesitated, then I said, "You mean French? Johnny French?"

She seemed very pleased that I knew.

"Of course! Francis Xavier Malloy," she said, "as you have been all my life, you're a dear, wonderful, understanding and wise friend. I knew I could tell you this."

I do not know now whether to attempt to tell this story as Martha told it to me, to report the dialogue verbatim, or whether to state the facts without color, emotion or dramatization of any kind, as I gathered them from Martha.

I have rested and flexed my arthritic fingers again now for a half hour while I have thought about this, and I believe a combination of Martha's own words and my honest narrative where it would make the picture clearest is desirable.

French took her to the airport, she said, and politely bade her goodbye at the gate whence her flight was scheduled to depart. In Los Angeles, as she entered the arrival gate, she was quite startled to see a sleek, black-haired young man with sharp green eyes, full lips and a generally dashing and insolent manner. It was Rory Williams, the murderer in her last book, *The Meek Shall Inherit Murder*. Johnny French had told her Williams would meet her in L.A., so she wasn't as surprised as she might otherwise have been.

Williams escorted her to a gleaming black new limousine, and when they were about a quarter mile away from the airport, he pulled the car over to the side of the road and pulled down heavy, black, silk cloth blinds with which the car, strangely enough, was equipped.

"You're not to know where you're being taken," he said to Martha, in the friendliest manner, as he got back in behind the wheel.

The ride took about an hour, as closely as Martha could estimate. They seemed, she thought, to be traveling long winding and ascending roads, and when Williams finally stopped, she saw they were parked before a lovely rambling house high on a mountain.

Williams took her into an exceptionally large, nicely furnished modern living room. Seated in groups around various lounges and chairs and standing in knots were approximately eighty people.

"It was, for all the world," Martha went on with her story, "just like any large cocktail party you might ever have attended. They were drinking and smoking and talking and laughing. But . . . but it was the strangest thing. They were all dressed in the clothes of different periods. Some like people dressed in the twenties . . . the way Johnny French was dressed. Some like the thirties. Some like the forties, and . . ."

She paused as she recalled the meeting.

" . . . and there was something very, very familiar about them, all of them. Before I realized what it was . . . in spite of the note, and in spite of Johnny French and Rory Williams . . . a little white haired man with a white mustache, Herman Grau—you remember him—he got up from a chair in a corner of the room. He clapped his hands sharply, and he said: 'Ladies and gentlemen. Rise, please. Here is your creator!'"

I said, "Martha, you look very tired. Wouldn't you like to go to bed, and tell me the rest of the story in the morning?"

She said, "Frank, please don't interrupt me. I must tell this to someone. I told Ed, but that's different. I must tell someone here, in this world. I must tell you. Please . . ."

I walked to Ed's bar in the corner of the living room and poured a water glass half full of whisky. I did not bother going after ice. I sat down on the sofa beside Martha again, and said, "Of course, Martha; go on."

Martha wrote seventy-nine detective novels between September of 1921 and last month. The first forty-eight of these featured Nurse Mary Brown as detective and the last thirty-one featured Chuck Silk. Each novel had one murderer. They were all there, at the reception, Martha said, except Johnny French, who had stayed back in New York. And Wilbur Hatch.

"You remember Wilbur?" Martha asked.

I did. He was the murderer in *Seven, Eight, Death Can't Wait*. He was a hypochondriac.

"Wilbur couldn't come," Martha said. "He wasn't feeling well."

That evening, said Martha, after the cocktail party, they had the

most wonderful dinner. Herman Grau acted as Master of Ceremonies, or Host or whatever you might call the spokesman of an assemblage of that kind. When they were on the dessert course, Grau got up and made a speech.

Martha repeated it for me, almost verbatim, but I really do not dare attempt to repeat it thus here. The gist is what is important.

Grau told Martha that the assembled group, the murderers she had created, had long smarted under the injustice of her treatment of them. Each of them had met death in one fashion or another, either via execution by the State, or by the hand of Silk or Nurse Brown, or some allied law enforcement officer. Each of them had died, officially or otherwise, simply because he or she had committed one or more simple murders.

It was Grau's firm belief, and indeed he maintained it was the well considered judgment of the entire group of murderers, that Charlie Silk and Nurse Mary Brown were guilty of many crimes far worse than murder, and that they (Martha's murderers) were therefore going to take it upon themselves to kill detectives Silk and Brown. They were going to take Martha along so that she could personally witness each of the two executions.

You will find it difficult to understand this, and perhaps it was the Scotch I consumed as Martha told the story, but by the time she told me about the murder of Charlie Silk, I almost believed it had happened, exactly as she described it to me. This very minute as I write about it, I am not at all sure that I do not believe it still. After all, I had heard the newscast myself. Charlie Silk was dead.

The charges against Charlie Silk, as Grau explained them, were:

(1) About ten years ago in Phoenix, Arizona, when he was twenty-six, he had married a young girl of sixteen, had quickly sired two children by her, and then deserted her. One of the children, a girl, had died of malnutrition at the age of six, about two years ago.

(2) Silk, who had since come to Hollywood, become a bit actor and opened a private detective agency, had managed to get a divorce, and had married a moderately wealthy woman of about fifty-five. He had squandered the woman's money through one bad investment after another, and had then divorced her. She was presently in the alcoholic ward of the county hospital.

The charges against Nurse Mary Brown were even more unattrac-

tive. She'd been a nurse since 1920 when she was only eighteen years old. But, fatherless and motherless, and brought up in a foster home where the adults were cold if not outright cruel to her, she was about as amoral and feelingless as a person could be. Strangely enough, nursing gave her the opportunity to indulge her amoral tastes as few other occupations might.

For one thing she was able to filch narcotics from the hospitals in which she worked. And since she used them only to stimulate herself and whichever man she was consorting with at any given time, she apparently never stole enough to arouse suspicion.

She had, said Mr. Grau, caused the deaths of at least six innocent persons either directly or indirectly, and it was high time she was punished.

As Martha finished narrating Mr. Grau's comments about Nurse Mary Brown, I looked over at the clock on the mantle over the fireplace. It was 2:17 A.M. Martha had been talking for more than two hours, and I had hardly interrupted her at all.

I looked at her now and I ached with compassion for her. Her cheeks were sunken, and the glow that had lain behind her eyes had diminished, almost as though the fire which caused it had died like the fire she had burned earlier in the fireplace.

She was tired beyond human endurance, and I should have refused to carry this meeting any further. Actually, I tried to end it by showing her how far-fetched were her ramblings.

I said, gently, "Martha, your Nurse Mary Brown was never like that. She was a sweet girl, something like you yourself . . ."

Martha shook her head.

"No," she said, "I didn't write her like that because I didn't know. But she *was* like that! She was! She was a wicked, wicked woman!"

It occurred to me then in an alarming flash that I, too, now was talking about a fictional character as though she were real. I reached over and patted Martha's hand.

"Come on, Martha," I said, "you're tired. Let me take you up to your room. After all, Mary Brown is just a name you made up. There's no real Nurse Mary Brown."

"Yes, there is," said Martha. "There are. There are thousands of Mary Browns, and scores of them are nurses. And this one, this evil one is dead. They killed her yesterday. And she *was* my Mary Brown."

She wanted to go on and tell me more but I prevailed upon her to go to bed with the promise that I would come over first thing in the morning to hear the rest of the story. I did not sleep at all that night.

Martha maintained that her murderers had planned the death of Charlie Silk, and Charlie Silk was dead. That was a coincidence. A strange one, but a coincidence nevertheless. As far as I knew there was no real Nurse Mary Brown. Or at least no Nurse Mary Brown who had been killed by Martha Hill Gibbs' murderers.

Yet the next day, just before noon when Martha urged me to come over again, I heard the rest of the story from her. Now it was not two o'clock in the morning. It was almost high noon of a bright August day in a quiet suburb, and yet Martha's story gave me the same eerie feeling its beginning had given me the night before.

Grau himself, she said, had taken her to Charlie Silk's penthouse apartment on the Sunset Strip. He had engaged Charlie in a conversation about the possibility of taking over the part of the character bearing his own name in the TV film series. He had maneuvered Charlie to the low brick wall on the edge of the penthouse terrace, and with one firm push had hurled him over. Martha said she sat there and watched the entire event.

Then, she said, one of the murderers, a Captain Samuel Hotchkiss, had flown with her from Los Angeles to Boston, direct flight.

"Do you remember Captain Hotchkiss, Frank?" she asked me.

I did, and quite well. He was a craggy-faced, red-haired, red-bearded ex-New England seaman, about sixty-five years old, who had been around the world a dozen times. He had murdered a wealthy owner of a line of pleasure steamships in a novel of Martha's called *Death Sails at Dawn*.

"When we got off the plane in Boston," said Martha, "Captain Hotchkiss took me directly to this brownstone house in Boston where Nurse Mary Brown lived. He told her he was an old friend of her dead husband's, and that I was his sister. She made tea for us. While she was out of the room, he put some kind of a drug in her cup of tea. She fell asleep, and when she was sleeping, he took a large hypodermic needle out of a little bag he was carrying, and plunged it into a vein on the inside of her left arm. He said it was a shot of heroin, sufficient to kill a dozen people. He then wiped the hypo and placed it in her right hand so it would look like she killed herself."

Now with the bright sunlight shining through the windows and making boxes on the living room rug as we talked, Martha's story simply seemed like the wanderings of a mind which had torn loose from its moorings and was drifting harmlessly. A good mind, trained through an adult lifetime of very successful detective story writing, to concoct all kinds of fanciful plots.

"That's very interesting, Martha," I said, "but you look very tired. Don't you think I should call Dr. Goldstein? Just to give you a routine check-up?"

"Don't you dare, Frank," she said. "I'm fine. I am tired, but I'm fine." She smiled then.

"You don't believe any of what I've told you, do you?" she said. "You think I'm a crazy old woman who's having hallucinations."

I patted her hand.

"I don't think anything of the kind, Martha. I think you're just tired. Is it okay if I call Dr. Goldstein?"

She smiled again.

"Sure, Francis Xavier Malloy. You always were a dear. A dull dear with no imagination whatsoever, but a dear anyway. Call the doctor."

Dr. Goldstein came that afternoon. Martha's heartbeat was extremely weak and irregular. He gave her an injection and prescribed complete rest.

"I'm worried about her, Frank," he told me. "I don't know what she's been through since Ed died, but she's in very serious trouble."

It was so serious Martha died a week later, exactly the same way Ed had died. Quietly, in her bed, sometime during the night. She, too, had a smile on her face. A very pleased smile, it seemed to me, strangely enough.

Our police department, in the meantime, had checked out the death of Charles Silk with the Los Angeles police. Although the L.A. officers felt that either Silk's first wife or someone close to her, or his second wife, the elderly woman who was in the county hospital alcoholic ward, or someone close to her might have had a strong enough motive to kill Silk, they had no evidence to indicate that he had not either fallen or jumped from his penthouse terrace.

They had talked to everyone who had seen him the day of his death, as far as they knew, except for an elderly gentleman with snow white hair and a snow white handlebar mustache. This gentleman had in-

quired at the desk if Silk was in his apartment, but he seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth. Hunseker thought it strange that this description should be similiar to the owner of the ebony limousine, but simply could not find any such person.

Naturally I did not ignore Martha's story of the murder of Nurse Mary Brown. The same day she told it to me I went into town, to the public library, and looked through every page of every newspaper for Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. I scanned each page carefully, looking for a report on the death by heroin of Mary Brown. I found nothing.

I went over to the out-of-town newsstands and purchased all the Boston papers for those days. In the Boston papers there were two homicides reported. A man had gone berserk and killed his wife and four children, and a teen-age hoodlum had stabbed a policeman in a hallway. But nothing on Mary Brown, or a death by hypodermic needle.

Still Martha's story, the story itself and the fierce conviction with which she told it continued to haunt me.

Martha had left a considerable estate, over and above what Ed had already left. I had been designated the Executor of the estate. It came to well over a half million dollars. One hundred thousand dollars of it went toward the establishment of a continuing scholarship at the same college where Martha had majored in English Literature, and where Sue was now going. The rest went to Sue, under my guardianship and with me acting as trustee of the estate.

All of Martha's papers, manuscripts and notes she bequeathed to me. I was worried about Sue as I anticipated her arrival for the funeral. She had had to withstand the shock of the deaths of three people whom presumably she loved, in a pathetically short time. Her granddad, her grandmother, and Charles Silk. Under the circumstances I was much relieved rather than shocked by our conversation on the way back from the cemetery.

"Uncle Frank," she said quietly, "do you remember how Grandma objected to my marrying Charlie Silk? How intense she was, even though she seemed a little incoherent about it?"

"Yes, I certainly do. I most certainly do."

"Well, she was right, Uncle Frank. He was a terrible man. When they were investigating his death, a very nice young man—his name is

Rog Shane—he was one of the detectives on the case—he became very irritated with me because I was crying and carrying on about Charlie's death. He forced me to come with him to the county hospital to have a talk with Charlie's second wife . . . that poor, poor woman. And he told me about the girl in Arizona . . .”

“I know,” I said, “your grandmother was a wise and unusual woman.”

She wanted to finish summer school, so she returned to California the day after the funeral. I proceeded with all the legal arrangements in connection with the will. A couple of weeks later, I sat in Martha's study in the Gibbs' house going through her papers. She was the type of woman who apparently kept many of her letters. She kept them in composition file boxes, one box for each year.

I went back to the first ones in the 1922 box. That was the year my wife, Ann, and I had first met Ed and Martha Hill Gibbs. Reading the letters was like reliving a whole, extraordinarily interesting and happy lifetime. There were clear reflections of my own early years with Ann and our two children; of Martha's pre-marital romance with Ed, and his youthful struggles as a doctor. There were all manner of letters, birthday, anniversary and other cards marking milestones in our lives. The birth of Martha's daughter, Ann, in 1923, one year after Martha and Ed were married. And Ann's own marriage at the age of eighteen, the same age her daughter Sue now was, to a nice young man of twenty, named Jimmy Hart. That was in 1941, and even though Jimmy went into the Navy almost immediately, Sue was born early in 1942.

Jimmy had been wounded in France, and shipped back to a Naval Hospital in Boston early in 1945. The German war, you'll recall, ended in May of that year. Jimmy was in the hospital there till the middle of June. They were tender and touching, these events of the war years, as reflected in Ann's letters to Martha and to Jimmy and his to Ann. And then I came, quite without warning of any kind, upon a letter which jolted my heart in my chest. I felt like I had been hit by a hard fist.

The letter was dated July 19, 1945. It was to Martha, who was then living in this very house, from her daughter, Ann, who was still living in Boston. It said:

“Dearest Mom—

“I have not wanted to write you about this, but if I don't I will go out of my mind. I am losing Jimmy and I don't know any way to stop from

losing him. You remember how much pain from his back he suffered all the while he was in the hospital. They started to give him drugs to ease the pain, and it did. I think they gave him the drugs right up until the time he was discharged. But I don't think that would have been bad, but one of his nurses, a girl, began to pay a lot of special attention to him and make a big fuss over him. It is the oddest thing, but this girl's name is Mary Brown, the same as the nurse in your stories. One time he even told me that this Mary Brown gets him extra drugs. She even gave him a shot of morphine one night right after the doctor told us he was going to have to start easing off drugs.

"She is a very beautiful girl, Mom, but she is a very bad girl. Since Jimmy came home from the hospital, she has been seeing him and going out with him. I suspected it for weeks, but just tonight, about an hour ago, Jimmy and I had a big fight and he admitted it. He says she gives him everything he needs and I don't and never could. I'm pretty sure she still gives him narcotics. I think she even uses them herself, but maybe just marijuana, but anyway he told me they have these wild parties, just the two of them. I love Jimmy, Mom, and I don't know what I will do if he leaves me. I don't know what Susie will do either because she loves him and needs him even more than I do. Please help me, Mom. Any way you possibly can.

Love,

Ann"

It came back to me then. I remembered Martha saying she was going to Boston to visit the kids. She didn't tell me anything about Mary Brown. She evidently didn't tell anyone, even Ed.

The night she got there Jimmy and Martha's daughter, Ann, were killed in an automobile accident. He ran off the road at high speed and crashed into a large oak tree. Martha brought Susie back to live with her and Ed. Susie was four years old.

And Martha's last Nurse Mary Brown detective novel was published in January of 1946.

I went to the bookcase and found it. It was *Death Sails at Dawn*. The murderer was a red-bearded, ex-sea captain from New England named Samuel Hotchkiss; and the dedication in the book read,

"To Susan
and her future
which I vow to protect"

There was nothing more about Mary Brown in any letters or notes beyond Ann's last letter to her mother. Now I was even more tormented by Martha's story. I went to Boston the following morning. It took me exactly eight days, and if it were not for the fact that I found a number of colleagues in high ranks in the Boston police department with whom I had worked over the years, I would not have been able to secure the information I needed in that time, if at all.

I learned that Nurse Mary Brown had been discharged from the Naval Hospital in 1948 because she was arrested and convicted on a charge of possession of narcotics. In 1955, when she was about thirty, she had married a doctor named Wilkerson, who was about seventy years old at the time. He died a year later, apparently from natural causes. She bought a small house in Newton, and it was there she was found dead the day Martha said she had been killed.

The police decided she had died from a self-administered overdose of heroin. A number of tradesmen had come and gone into the house that day, and one man with a red beard had entered and left, but there was nothing particularly suspicious about him, and in any event a fairly aggressive search did not produce him. It did not make the papers because other more spectacular news crowded it out.

I also learned that an autopsy on Jimmy Hart, following his death in the automobile accident, revealed that he had been under the influence of narcotics, although it was morphine, not heroin.

On the plane returning from Boston, I turned these facts over and over in my mind. Since then, in virtually every waking moment, and they have been many for I cannot sleep, I have reviewed the case. Again and again and again!

Certainly Martha had the motive to kill both Charlie Silk and Nurse Mary Brown. By killing Silk she had prevented Sue from entering into what almost surely would have been a tragic marriage. By killing Mary Brown Wilkerson she avenged the death of Ann and Jimmy Hart.

But, I ask myself, why would she have waited sixteen years to kill Mrs. Wilkerson? And the answer, of course, is that she probably never would have killed Mary Brown Wilkerson except that the death of Ed unbalanced her. Or perhaps it was the combination of Ed's death, and Sue's sudden announcement that she was planning to marry Charles Silk.

How could I account for the fact that Martha herself was not seen at

either the Silk murder locale or the Wilkerson murder scene, but that a man fitting the description of Martha's murderer, Herman Grau, was seen at the first; and her murderer, Samuel Hotchkiss, at the second?

In reviewing this phase of the case in my mind, I recalled Martha's appearance at a Famous Persons masquerade party, which our mutual neighbor, Mrs. Dorsch, gave at the Country Club two summers ago. Martha came dressed as Josef Stalin, and with a wig of coal black hair and a black handle-bar mustache, plus a little stuffing, she made a very convincing Stalin. There was no reason in the world why she could not have made up as convincingly as Grau and Hotchkiss. And her normally deep husky voice would have abetted those impersonations just as it did her Stalin impersonation.

As I pondered the possibility of the masquerade I recalled that hot August night not so long ago when I had seen the smoke coming out of the Gibbs chimney, and Martha had asked me not to come over for another hour, and the lingering smell of burning hair when I finally did enter her living room. She could have been burning the Grau and Hotchkiss mustaches and hairpieces on that occasion.

But I, myself, had seen Johnny French, or at least a man who resembled Johnny French, pick Martha up in front of her house. He was certainly real. But then he may easily have been a man resembling the Johnny French of Martha's story, whom Martha had hired to pick her up that morning, just to make me feel that her subsequent tale of fictional murderers was true. I am a creature of habit, and she knew I would be out at that hour of the morning.

But why would she go to such pains to set me up for acceptance of such a wild and improbable series of circumstances? Why, indeed! Why would the idea of having her fictional murderers avenge their capture, and own deaths, by murdering the living counterparts of the fictional detectives who exposed them occur to Martha in the first place? If indeed it did! Who, after all, knows what the human mind will do under certain stresses after more than six decades?

I checked and rechecked every element of the situation. I even went up to New Rochelle to talk to Ferdinand Wilmot, the retired opera singer from whom Herman Grau had bought the ancient limousine for \$10,000 in cash. His description fitted Grau perfectly.

In the position of the Executor of Martha's estate it was not at all difficult for me to trace through every known bank account she pos-

sessed to find a \$10,000 cash withdrawal around the time the car was purchased from Mr. Wilmot. I found no such withdrawal, but then Martha could easily have had that amount in an account I knew nothing about, or for that matter she could even have had it saved and put away somewhere in cash. And if she was unbalanced enough to have decided to perpetrate the entire mad scheme in the first place, she certainly would not have hesitated to waste \$10,000 carrying it out.

There were and there are still times when I fit all the pieces into place, and as a veteran, coldly logical, altogether mature ex-law enforcement officer, I say to myself: My friend, Martha Hill Gibbs became mentally deranged when her husband of almost forty years died, and she killed a man named Charles Silk and a woman named Mary Brown Wilkerson.

There are other times when I say: No! Life is full of coincidences much stranger than any of these. This is simply a case of an unsavory and unwholesome man named Charles Silk who fell from the penthouse terrace of his apartment, or possibly could not tolerate himself as a human being any longer and therefore decided to destroy himself. And a woman who led a wicked and dissolute life did likewise.

And then there are those increasingly frequent times when I say: As completely incredible as it seems, a group of fictional murderers came to life and executed the living counterparts of the fictional detectives who exposed and disposed of them in a series of very successful novels.

Then again I say: No, it is utterly ridiculous! There are no supernatural forces in this world. My friend, Martha Hill Gibbs, killed those two people.

I had come to that conclusion for the thousandth time yesterday, when Sergeant Hunseker dropped by. From the viewpoint of the Missing Persons Bureau, and for that matter, of the Police Department as a whole, the Martha Hill Gibbs case was of no official interest whatsoever. As far as they were concerned, Martha had just gone away on a trip which was entirely her business, and returned voluntarily. And a man in Hollywood had either accidentally fallen, or deliberately hurled himself from his penthouse terrace. And a woman in Newton had, again either deliberately or accidentally, given herself an overdose of heroin.

We talked about all sorts of things, Sergeant Hunseker and I, and at one point, we touched on the Martha Hill Gibbs case.

"You know, Commissioner," he said, "one thing about that case. You remember that crazy invitation signed, 'Affectionately, your murderers,' we found?"

"Yes, of course," I said.

"Well, I was talking to Phil Collins, a friend of mine in the Lab the other day. They've checked that note out with the FBI, Scotland Yard, the French Sureté Nationale and Interpol, and you know what, Commissioner? As far as any of them have been able to determine, no typewriter ever built by man could have written that note, and it was not handwritten, printed or duplicated in any other way known to science. Isn't that weird?"

"It is, Sergeant," I said. "Yes, indeed, it is."

And last night I fell asleep in my chair—at least I think I fell asleep—while watching the eleven o'clock news, and I had the strangest dream. I dreamed that Martha Hill Gibbs came into the room and sat down in that blue chair right across the room, and greeted me most warmly.

And she said:

"I just had to come by to tell you, Frank. I'm so happy. Sue is marrying a young man just like you. He's just been promoted to Detective Second Grade in the Los Angeles Police Department. She met him while they were investigating the death of Charlie Silk."

I woke with a start—or at least I thought I did. And I thought I saw Martha walking out the door, but through it, unopened. And it wasn't more than a half hour later when my phone rang:

"Mr. Malloy, please," said a woman's voice.

"Yes, yes, this is Mr. Malloy."

"This is long distance. Will you accept a collect call from a Miss Susan Gibbs in Malibu, California?"

I tried to say "yes," but no sound came from my dry throat until my third attempt. Then Sue came on.

"Uncle Frank," she said, "I'm calling you collect because I'm in a phone booth on the Pacific Coast Highway, and neither Rog nor I had enough money on us to pay for the call. We were driving along, and he just asked me to marry him, and I made him stop the car at the first phone booth we came to—"

I don't know. I don't know.

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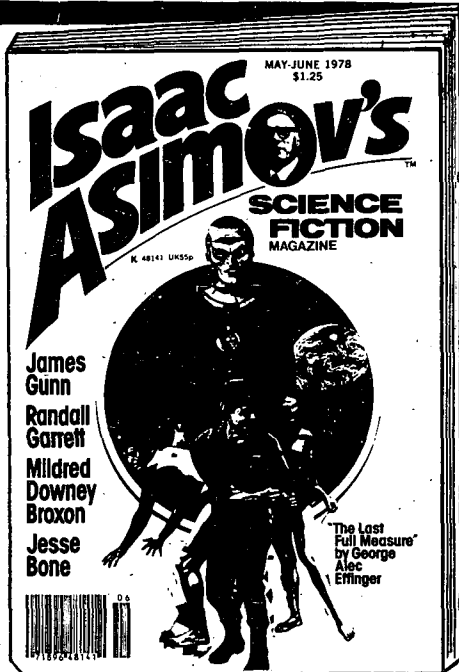
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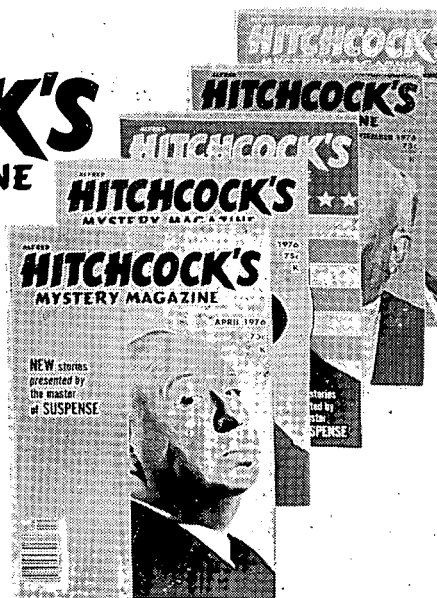
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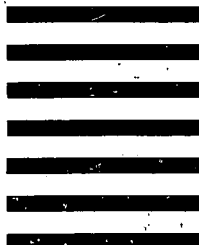
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